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San Diego County Taxpayers Association Announces Winners for Golden Watchdog & Fleece Awards

Awards Committee recognizes The Downtown San Diego Partnership for the Clean and Safe program as well as scolds the Regional Task Force on Homelessness for its lack of transparency and refusal to share data.

San Diego, CA (November 17, 2023) --- The San Diego County Taxpayers Association (SDCTA) announced the winners to be acclaimed and chided last night at the 27th Annual Golden Watchdog and Fleece Awards. The awards recognize the best and worst in public spending, decision-making, and efficiency.

The Golden Watchdog and Fleece Awards, nicknamed “the Goldens,” had convened community and business leaders, elected officials, and more to applaud good governance and denounce the bad that took place through 2022 and 2023. The nominated policies and programs were submitted to the Association through a public process. The confidential Goldens’ Award Committee carefully deliberated each nominee to determine who should earn Fleece or Watchdog awards.

The “watchdog” winners for this year:

Grand Golden Watchdog - Downtown San Diego Partnership “Clean & Safe”

The Downtown San Diego Partnership does a great job keeping our downtown community clean, safe, and vibrant for San Diegans to enjoy. Their program “Clean and Safe” does just that. This program provides a vital public service and supplements the City of San Diego’s efforts. The Clean and Safe program encompasses a wide variety of services, including maintenance, safety, beautification, and homelessness services. Since the program’s inception, the Downtown San Diego Partnership has removed 959 graffiti incidents and delivered nearly 2,000 meals to unhoused folks living downtown. They even developed an app to allow people to request maintenance or report safety concerns. We are grateful to the Downtown Partnership for their commitment to make downtown a safe and enjoyable place for all San Diegans!

Golden Watchdog Award in Homelessness Services - Urban Street Angels

With support from the City of San Diego and the County, Urban Street Angels has expanded a youth shelter that provides wraparound services including mental health support, job training, and case management. Collaboration between the three entities resulted in 70 new beds and includes a partnership with the County of San Diego’s Behavioral Health Services to provide additional resources for mental support and coaching that the youth may need. Through this shelter, Urban Street Angels has created a safe space for vulnerable youth, and the program has had remarkable success with only 2% of clients returning to the streets in the last year and a plurality of clients exiting to subsidized rental properties.



Golden Watchdog Award in Municipal and Educational Services - Helix Water District

Earlier this year, Helix Water District completed its restoration of the Tunnel Hill water tanks in order to bring them up to current standards, including adding seismic restraints. The project cost \$3.6 million dollars, while a full restoration would have cost closer to \$10 million. This restoration not only brought clean drinking water to Helix Water District residents; it saved them over \$6 million!

Media Watchdog Award - Alberto Garcia and Art Castanares, La Prensa

These two journalists at La Prensa broke the story on the questionable activities of brother and sister Jesus and Andrea Cardenas with Grassroots Resources. It seems Jesus' two simultaneous paychecks – with the biz and as chief of staff to San Diego Councilmember Stephen Whitburn – just wasn't enough to cover basic life needs; the Chula Vista Councilmember and her brother are now indicted for potentially defrauding taxpayers through COVID-relief programs like the paycheck protection program. It's just shocking to learn about two insiders deep in the political establishment – may be why voters of all political persuasions are increasingly distrustful of government.

Public-Private Partnership Award - San Diego County Sheriff's Department and many others

The San Diego County Sheriff's department invested in vocational training for inmates, including culinary training and hydroponic gardens. Both of these programs provide creative outlets for inmates, as well as new opportunities for career training and skill building. Students in the programs complete a combination of classes, work hours, and exams to earn a nationally recognized certificate.

The “fleece” winners for this year:

Grand Golden Fleece Award - Regional Task Force on Homelessness

According to its website, the Regional Task Force on Homelessness “serves as a funder, regional convener, promoter of best practices, and policy leader in San Diego's collective efforts to end homelessness.” As a convener, wouldn't that mean they want to partner with other organizations working in this arena? As a promoter of best practices, wouldn't they support the independent study of their work to understand what's working and what's not? The answer to both questions is a big fat NO. Despite providing requested data in the past to our organization for studies, RTFH has now closed its doors, not only to Taxpayers but to the very public agencies funding homelessness services. In the past year, five cities have requested data from RTFH on the programs that they themselves fund so they can understand what works within their communities. The RTFH response? Funding a program does not entitle public agencies to data. A wide variety of creative excuses have followed, including false accusations that data requests asked for personally identifiable information and claims that sharing data would put their federal funding at risk. As they think up creative ways to deny data to public agencies, we continue to spend more taxpayer dollars on a worsening homelessness crisis throughout our region.

Golden Fleece Award in Municipal and Educational Services - San Diego Public Utilities Department

Earlier this year, the San Diego Public Utilities Department failed to send out over a million water bills to residents and did not notify them of the delay. Some residents, after receiving their bills, discovered costs of several thousand dollars due to leaks or other factors resulting in extra water usage. The head of the San Diego Public Utilities



Department publicly apologized in August, but only after calls from council members and residents, and numerous media requests.

“The winner and finalists this year reflected creative and innovative tactics when dealing with ongoing challenges and our homelessness crisis,” said Haney Hong, president and CEO of the Association. “Ultimately, the Awards Committee applauded cutting-edge resourceful solutions while criticizing poor planning and use of taxpayer dollars.”

This year’s program took three notable departures from the past.

First, this program used to be held earlier in the year, often a month or two off the heels of tax day in April. The Association has moved it to the fall permanently so that in election years, the Association’s recognition of good and bad performance occurs when incumbents and candidates for public office are racing to win or keep public trust.

Second, while accepting and reviewing traditional municipal and educational service nominations, the Association committed to having an award category for the region’s most pressing concerns. This year, the Association sought nominations particularly in housing and homelessness services. San Diego has been named the country’s most unaffordable city, due to exploding housing costs, and the homelessness crisis worsens.

Third, the Association has added a symposium to the program to convene public policy practitioners and public office holders and to discuss the region’s most pressing challenge, which is our growing homelessness. The first panel of elected officials, which included Mayors John McCann (Chula Vista), Esther Sanchez (Oceanside), and Bill Wells (El Cajon) and County District Attorney Summer Stephan, discussed how the community can build a shared understanding of root causes of homelessness and opportunities to invest in upstream prevention and diversion. The second panel of public administrators, which included San Diego Chief Operating Officer Eric Dargan and City Managers Maria Kachadoorian (Chula Vista) and Graham Mitchell (El Cajon), had dialogue on ways to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiencies of public investments in homelessness prevention, diversion, and crisis management.

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The San Diego County Taxpayers Association (SDCTA) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization, dedicated to promoting accountable, cost-effective, and efficient government and opposing unnecessary new taxes and fees. For the last 78 years, SDCTA has served as “*San Diego’s Taxpayer Watchdog Group*” by educating the public and helping to save the region’s citizens millions of dollars. Public opinion polls consistently rate SDCTA as the most “influential” and “trusted” public policy institution in San Diego. The membership is led by President & CEO Haney Hong. SDCTA envisions a future where San Diego citizens receive a better return on investment in public assets and services. For more information, please visit www.sdcta.org, [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) or call 619-234-6423.