

**Salt Lake City, UT****Sandy group forgoes grant competition following reports of cheating**

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By Spencer Garn

SANDY -- A Sandy non-profit has decided to forgo entry into Pepsi's monthly online fundraising competition after learning of reports that voting results are possibly being manipulated.

David Bresnahan, president of the Association for Health and Wellness in Sandy, said they decided to withhold entry to the Pepsi Refresh Project after another contestant, Ann Goody, notified Bresnahan that an unknown person she identified as "Mr. Magic" was soliciting offers for votes in exchange for monetary compensation.

"I was disappointed but not surprised," Bresnahan said. "We should be in the competition right now, but I just decided that this could wait for another month."

The online fundraising contest offers millions of dollars for nonprofit groups and charities. The organizations can compete for votes that can translate into grants from Pepsi.

Goody, a founder of the Three Ring Ranch, an exotic animal sanctuary in Kona, Hawaii, became suspicious of the competition's integrity after the ranch dropped several spots out of the top 10 in only a day or two despite a campaign of e-mails, phone calls, Facebook postings and voting stations set up on laptops at elementary schools. The New York Times reported the Ranch was ranked fifth for most of the month before the sudden and dramatic drop.

"It was pretty horrible," Goody told the Deseret News. "We gave a month of our lives. We worked non-stop promoting."

Goody, Bresnahan said, asked him to investigate Mr. Magic's methods for manipulating voting; but he declined, saying he didn't want to play that role. Goody carried on the investigation herself and told the New York Times a contender used Mr. Magic's India-based service to generate proxy votes from abroad in order to win a \$50,000 grant in October.

Bresnahan said although Pepsi isn't doing anything wrong, the company should take steps to legitimize the competition for the future.

"Otherwise, it seems fruitless to ask real people to vote and then get beaten anyway just 'cause someone's got a computer that can do it," Bresnahan said. "We're not going to do it until it solves itself."

In a statement to The New York Times, Pepsi said it deploys a variety of methods to maintain the integrity of the contest and that it takes "any allegation of fraud very seriously." Pepsi also said it will take appropriate action after a thorough investigation.

"I don't know that they should take money away from anybody, but I do think they should reward money to people who should have gotten it in the first place," Bresnahan said.

The Association for Health and Wellness finds volunteers in existing organizations throughout the world to teach its 15-step stop smoking program. Bresnahan said the association would use grant money from Pepsi to produce and duplicate a video to train thousands of people how to teach the smoking cessation program.

Thousands of groups nationwide vie for a share of \$1.3 million in grants from the Pepsi competition every month. The [Food and Care Coalition in Provo](#) has not withdrawn from the competition and continues to vie for one of two \$250,000 grants scheduled to be assigned Feb. 1. On Monday afternoon, the Coalition was ranked 35th in the number of votes nationally.

If the Coalition is awarded the grant, it will use the money to finish the second floor of a housing unit in Provo for Utah's homeless.

"It is extremely unlikely that the Provo group has any chance to win because of this problem," Bresnahan said.

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