

# News

## In this holiday season, choose your donations wisely

By PASHA CARROLL  
SUN REPORTER

The holidays are in full force, but before giving to a charity, consumer services recommends doing your homework.

"Unfortunately, some so-called charities are outright scams," Charles H. Bronson, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Commissioner warned. "That's why it is important for consumers to call and find out if a charity has registered or is exempt. Failure to properly register should raise a huge red flag with consumers."

According to Consumer

Services, the holiday season is one of the busiest for charities, with many collecting about half of their yearly donations between Thanksgiving and New Year's.

Since November 2003, 700 more charities have registered with the State of Florida. Florida law requires charities to register their financial information including how much money comes in and how it is spent.

A registered charity's information can be found in the annual "Gift Givers' Guide," produced by Consumer Services. The guide lists all registered charities and provides details about how much money



goes to fund-raising, salaries and operating expenses and how much goes towards the actual charity. It also gives the names of professional solicitors and consultants, who work for the organization.

In deciding which organization to give to, Consumer Services does not endorse any charity, nor

do they mandate how charities spend donated funds.

Bronson suggests a few things to consider when deciding whether to donate to a charity this holiday season.

Don't choose an organization because of an impressive name. Find out what they actually do.

Beware of charities that play to your emotions and don't have a stringent plan to spend funds. Don't hesitate to ask the charity for more written information about the organization.

Don't give cash. Write a check to the organization, not an individual and be wary of an organization that sends a "runner" to pick up the donation.

Consumers have the right to ask for the organization's financial report and federal tax identification number. In fact, you should ask for the tax ID number in order to claim your contribution as a tax deduction.

"We have a record number of charities registered with the Department and the onslaught of requests can be confusing for many people trying to decide where the money should go," Bronson said. "But consumers need to take time to research a charity to ensure it is legitimate and that their donations are being spent as they intend."

## Former Code Enforcement Coordinator reflects on differences

By PASHA CARROLL  
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"The county is going to have to put their foot down and make Code Enforcement from the Gulf to the state line and from east to west," Gary Hulion, Walton County's former Code

Enforcement Coordinator said.

"North of the bay is very gray," he said.

Hulion, who was going on four years in county Code Enforcement, said that Walton County's Land Development Code and Comprehensive Plan are

hard to enforce in the north end of the county where property owners do not support code enforcement and think the concept takes away property rights and adds to the government's intrusion.

North of the bay Hulion said, "It is a lot of 'you

can't tell me what to do with my land."

South of the bay, where he said some of his most high profile cases were, property owners were compliant with code enforcement.

Hulion said that in South Walton owners and resi-

dents want to protect property values and natural resources. He said a lot of people in the south end come from areas where codes and zoning are

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