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Hernando, Citrus school districts snub Glenn Beck group's Constitution booklets

BROOKSVILLE — It started as an act of patriotic philanthropy.

Last month, the Nature Coast 912 Project donated thousands of U.S. Constitution booklets to the Hernando and Citrus school. The goal was to get a pocket-sized booklet into the hands of every eighth-grader.

The donation, however, prompted officials in both districts to consider: When does a copy of the Constitution and other historic documents become political material or advertising?

Officials in both districts concluded the booklets have some problematic characteristics, so they won't be handed out as the 912 Project group had hoped.

"It doesn't matter what group it is," Hernando superintendent Bryan Blavatt said. "The question is, are we giving out resources that are primary sources ... or is it subject to opinions and viewpoints and selective choice of materials?"

Hernando received 2,500 booklets for seven schools; Citrus got 1,315 for five schools. The booklets were not all identical and some came with additional material. All have a stamp or sticker of the "Nature Coast Pasco-Hernando-Citrus 912 Groups," and some included the group's website address, said Mike Mullen, assistant superintendent for Citrus schools.

Some booklets donated to Hernando were published by the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, whose website describes its mission as serving communities through "fellowship, compassion, and dedication to God, family and country."

These booklets contained other primary texts such as the Declaration of Independence, Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Patrick Henry's Call to Arms. A foreword to the booklet reads: "Unless Americans remember and preserve our rich heritage of liberty, a new Dark Age of tyranny could lock the majority of mankind into the harsh chains of totalitarian slavery."

Some booklets donated to Hernando were accompanied by a one-page sheet from the Cato Institute, a conservative think tank, with the heading "Constitutional Authority." The sheet

asserts that the Constitution has been misinterpreted, leading to "a government that's effectively unlimited ... and increasingly unaffordable."

Booklets donated to the Citrus district refers the reader to books published by the National Center for Constitutional Studies, a conservative, religious-themed organization formed by Mormon political writer Cleon Skousen, who argued that the founding of the United States was a divine miracle. One of Skousen's books referenced in the booklet, *The 5,000 Year Leap*, is often cited by political commentator and 912 Project founder Glenn Beck, who wrote a foreword for a later edition.

"When you add all of those things together, it's not just a simple Constitution," Mullen said. "You've got to be real careful when you're passing out information to the kids."

The National Center for Constitutional Studies is not a credible source of Constitutional history, said Doug Kendall, founder and president of the Constitutional Accountability Center (CAC), a Washington, D.C.-based think tank and law firm.

"I don't know that there can be too many copies of the Constitution in circulation, but when it comes to teaching about the Constitution, I think we should trust our teachers and the history books, not the tea party or the 912 Project or any other ideological group," Kendall said.

Citrus school officials plan to return the booklets because the School Board attorney concluded the additional content in them conflicted with the district policy forbidding the distribution of political materials, Mullen said.

In Hernando, which has a similar policy, principals were told to make the booklets available for students who wanted one but not to hand them out to every student, Blavatt said.

"It's a way to provide an opportunity for students to get the material, which was the intent of the group, and not be in a situation where we're handing it to them and not giving them a choice," Blavatt said.

He added: "Ninety-nine percent of the material there is valuable to students. You have to weigh that."

Blavatt said he did not know how many of the booklets remained.

The districts' decisions puzzled 912 Project members, said organizer Maureen Arrigale of Hudson. The group reached out to school officials last year with the idea for the donation and submitted booklets for review, Arrigale said.

"The booklets they have are the same booklets we sent them," Arrigale said. "We're not promoting any kind of agenda or politics whatsoever. Our name just happens to be on the book."

The Nature Coast 912 group donated money to the East Pasco Tea Party Patriots to purchase Constitution booklets for Pasco County schools this year, Arrigale said.

The Patriots donated Constitutions to the district last year and officials had no concerns about passing them out, said district spokeswoman Summer Romagnoli. The booklets had the stamp of the East Pasco Tea Party Patriots, but that in itself is not a problem, Romagnoli said.

"As long as it's not included with any sort of political message," she said.

Mullen acknowledged that staffers had reviewed the booklets but did not research the National Center for Constitutional Studies publications or the 912 Project until the *Times* inquired. He also noted that the booklets reviewed by staff did not have the 912 Group stamp or sticker.

"I know they claim they're not a political group, but they have direct links from their website that do take you to partisan political websites," Mullen said.

Beck founded the 912 Project in 2009 on nine principles and 12 values he says represent the spirit of the American people on the day after the Sept. 11 attacks. Among them: "I believe in God and He is the center of my life." The group is non-partisan, but its conservative membership overlaps with the tea party movement.

Members of the 912 Project and tea party groups lament what they see as a lack of accurate instruction in U.S. history classes.

"What we're out to do is educate people that things in the Bill of Rights are being taken away from us and are being misconstrued," said Nature Coast 912 member and Hudson resident Annette Weeks.

This past spring, the Tea Party Patriots started a nationwide campaign to remind teachers that a 2004 federal law requires public schools to teach Constitution lessons the week of Sept. 17, commemorating the day the document was signed. The Patriots started an adopt-a-school program and members encouraged school officials to use curriculum provided by the National Center for Constitutional Studies.