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Entries sought for Albany flag design contest

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When a West Albany High School student club spoke to the city council April 27 to offer to design an official city flag, the city council voted to make it a public contest, offering \$100 for the winning design.

The club responsible for the flag design contest is the Greater Unified Albany Vexillological Association. Vexillology, according to the official definition, is the scientific study of the history, symbolism and usage of flags or, by extension, any interest in flags in general.

West Albany math teacher and club leader Cole Pouliot said the club got the idea for the Albany flag project after watching a Ted Talk on the subject.

"We just noticed that Albany didn't have a flag," he said, adding that the value of a city having an official flag is that it announces the city's identity.

Designing a proper flag, however, is not simply a matter of picking colors and including symbols. As any vexillologist will tell you, there are five guidelines that make a great flag. According to the book, "Good Flag, Bad Flag," by Ted Kaye of the National Vexillological Association, a great flag has a simple design; so simple that a child could draw it from memory. Next, a flag should use symbolism meaningful to the community. Also, a flag should feature only two or three basic colors. A great flag also does not include any lettering or seals, and finally a great flag should be distinctive.

With this criteria in mind, Pouliot said his club is excited to be participating in the contest. But so far, interest has flagged, and the contest hasn't exactly seen a banner turn out. The contest kicked off May 31, and so far only three entries have come in. Nonetheless, two of the entries are from contestants outside the club. Pouliot said the club welcomes the competition.

"We're just happy that Albany will have a city flag," he said. "And if it's not ours, then it's because theirs was better."

Beyond the prize money, the contestant with the winning design would have the pride associated with being the person behind the flag. Up in Alaska, for example, a young kid named Benny Benson is legendary for having designed the winning flag for that state, back when it was still a territory, in 1927. Benson won \$1,000 for his design: a blue field with the Big Dipper and North Star. Of course, \$1,000 in 1927 was \$13,362.99 in today's economy. So if the council wanted to match Benson's winnings, they might as well buy the winner a new car. Or, we can consider that \$100 today was \$7.28 in 1927.

Pouliot said if the club won the prize money, they've already decided they would donate it back to the city and use it to make the flag more widely known. The plan is to unveil the winning flag Nov. 11 at the Albany Veteran's Day parade.

"I'd like to see kids there with the American flag on their right hand and the Albany flag in their left hand," said Pouliot.

The deadline for submissions is July 5. Five finalist designs will be on public display July 22, when the city will invite public input. The council plans to select a winner in late August.

To enter the contest, visit cityofalbany.net/flag

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