

Free Columbia

Our view: The Columbia Association ought to operate more like a democracy

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The Columbia Association manages a peaceable kingdom, with carefully tended landscapes, a network of health clubs, an array of cultural and recreational activities and other amenities. But some residents of the Howard County city have come to view the nonprofit organization as too clubby, too generous with benefits for insiders and too secretive.

So it is that the association has found itself under assault from the Alliance for a Better Columbia. The citizens group has called for lowering the association's annual assessment by 7 percent in next year's budget and eliminating employee bonuses, which it claims have increased by one-third over the past three years.

When the group asked for information on bonuses paid to Columbia Association staff, it was provided with copies of the [IRS](#) 990, which tax-exempt nonprofits are generally required to file, and some limited additional information. But requests for more details on the bonuses were turned down by Maggie Brown, the association's president, who noted that the organization had no legal obligation to provide the information.

Ms. Brown may be right on the law, but she's forgotten who pays her salary - the citizens of Columbia - and they deserve a full accounting of who got what and why. The association functions as a little democracy with elected representatives and a council, and it ought to act like one when citizens ask probing questions. Association leaders seem to be having some second thoughts about their actions. Steven Sattler, a spokesman for the organization, said last week that the head of the Alliance for a Better Columbia would be provided next month with some information on last year's bonus package.

That small step should be the first of many leading to more open democracy in Columbia.