

Voters rally against Pinole officials

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By Tom Lochner

More than 50 people in blue-on-white "Recall" T-shirts marched in front of Pinole City Hall on Tuesday, chanting and carrying signs promoting a recall of three City Council members.

"No corruption in Pinole," their signs read. "Vote them out."

The recall drive targets Mayor Maria Alegria and Councilmen David Cole and Stephen Tilton for their vote in May not to renew the contract of former City Manager Belinda Espinosa and for their supposedly "suspect" relationship with Pear Street Bistro owner Gary Wong. Wong owes the city more than \$450,000 in redevelopment loans and interest and stopped making loan payments 21 months ago.

During the council meeting Tuesday night, both camps hammered on familiar campaign themes. Frankie Martinez blamed city staff and management and the Redevelopment Subcommittee, on which former Mayor Betty Boyle sat last year, for failing to resolve Wong's loan delinquency. Boyle, who lost a re-election bid in November, logs petitions for the recall sponsor Concerned Citizens of Pinole.

Marcia Kalapus, citing a timeline produced by Espinosa, told of months of efforts by staff to resolve the delinquency and of Wong's pique a year ago when Espinosa opposed his request for a \$300,000 grant to pay off a bank loan. Wong did not return a call Wednesday.

Cindy Trego said that Tilton should not have voted in May, after only six months on the council, on Espinosa, who was city manager for three years. Addressing the targeted trio, she asked: "With this great friendship that you have, how at this point have you not been able to convince him (Wong) to make any payments on the loans?"

"And the friendship continues," she said. "He hasn't paid the city. Not a dime."

Jerrold Parsonsof Rodeo, who is the wine events coordinator at Pear Street Bistro, praised Alegria as a mentor, a strong person and a good woman who has done "amazing things," especially for transportation. He also accused Councilwoman Mary Horton, a recall backer, of snubbing him after she found out his party affiliation. Horton said she did not know what Parsons is talking about.

Pinole resident Brian Burns took issue with a recall backer who he said had disparaged Tilton, a San Francisco sheriff's lieutenant, by calling him a court bailiff and a jailer.

"This councilman has put his life on the line for the public," Burns said. "I find those insults to his integrity to be an atrocity to him personally."

Burns called Alegria "one of the most respected mayors" in his more than 22 years as a Pinole homeowner.

Having almost lost his own house to foreclosure, Burns empathized with Wong's plight and praised the council for not foreclosing on the bistro. Burns said the cost of a recall, which he pegged at "over \$200,000," would be better spent on a skate park.

"Divide and conquer for no other reason than to cause more financial woes for the people of this city, where there are too many vacant lots already, is just an atrocity," he said.

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Contra Costa County, which conducts elections for Pinole under contract, has given the city an estimate of up to \$7.70 per registered voter for a standalone election and about \$2.75 if a recall election were to coincide with the February presidential primary. With just fewer than 9,000 registered voters, the city's tab could be about \$69,000 for a standalone election or \$25,000 in February. The estimates likely are on the high side, officials said, but they do not include costs of verifying signatures.

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