

Council absences questioned

PINOLE: Sponsors of recall attempt ask why two members have been missing from several meetings

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By Tom Lochner

Sponsors of a recall attempt have seized on recent absences of Pinole Councilmen David Cole and Stephen Tilton at council meetings to question the duo's commitment to serve.

Cole said Wednesday that job interviews and the death of his grandmother took him out of town several times recently. Tilton cited several instances of illness and a death in his family.

"I would like to know why Councilman Cole and Councilman Tilton no longer attend the council meetings," resident Jeff Rubin said Tuesday evening, addressing a dais occupied by only two council members, while a third attended by teleconference.

At the opening of the meeting, officials announced that Cole and Tilton were excused, the former for a family emergency, the latter for illness. Councilwoman Mary Horton, who has said she is caring for her ailing father, provided her comments by an audio link, illustrated with her picture on the television simulcast.

It was Cole's third straight absence and Tilton's second. On July 31, Tilton called in ill, and Cole, who had recused himself from an item on the closed-session calendar, did not show up for the open session.

Cole missed the July 17 meeting to attend services for his grandmother in Sacramento, he said. All five members were present June 30 and June 26; Tilton missed the June 19 meeting and was excused from the June 12 meeting.

Cole, Tilton and Horton were absent for a scheduled June 8 special meeting, forcing cancellation for lack of a quorum. All five members attended the June 5 meeting.

"What's the point of having a five-person council when only three members show up for the meetings?" Rubin asked. "How can the council conduct business?"

"Perhaps the council should consider establishing an attendance requirement for its members," Rubin said, suggesting Cole and Tilton "resign now, before they are recalled, if they are unwilling to do the job they were elected to do."

The sponsors want to recall Cole, Tilton and Mayor Maria Alegria for, among other reasons, their vote to oust former City Manager Belinda Espinosa and their "suspect" relationship with Pear Street Bistro owner Gary Wong.

Alegria on Wednesday dismissed Rubin's complaint as "personal politics" and said he and his cohorts slow down business by disrupting City Council meetings.

She defended Cole's and Tilton's attendance records, citing an unusually busy 2007 during which she convened at least 27 council meetings, including workshops, in just the first six months. Some recent meetings, including Tuesday's, lasted six hours or longer. Alegria also noted that council members go to other functions, such as the funeral of two firefighters in Concord on July 27 that she and Tilton attended along with Fire Chief Jim Parrott.

Council members face more scrutiny . . . 2

“We’re really on 24/7 — that’s how I see this job,” Alegria said. “It’s not just attending meetings; it’s also supporting businesses, firefighters, public safety employees at these events.”

Tilton said his heart is very much in the job of council member, although, he said, “It’s very difficult to sit through people slinging mud at you and innuendo.”

Some council members, moreover, “excuse themselves early because of the lateness of the hour.”

“My desire to be everywhere and represent the city has actually backfired on me,” Tilton said, referring to a photo of him and Alegria attending a business awards dinner with Wong, then president of the Pinole Chamber of Commerce. The photo was taken earlier this year and appears on recall literature.

Tilton said he called in sick Tuesday, felt better and did some campaigning, then felt ill again during the evening.

Cole said the July 31 closed session lasted longer than he expected, and he had to leave before the council reconvened in open session to pick up some binders in Hercules for a meeting of his son’s soccer team coaches.

Cole said he liquidated his business, Pinole Valley Landscape, and sold off its equipment. He said he expects to secure a different kind of job soon.

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