

Pinole braces for recall storm

Contra Costa Times

August 19, 2007

By Lisa Vorderbrueggen
Times Political Editor

PINOLE IS HEADED straight for a nasty recall storm.

Recall proponents say they will stand on the steps of City Hall on Tuesday and announce the successful completion of their signature-gathering drive.

If an adequate number of signatures prove valid, Mayor Maria Alegria and council members Stephen Tilton and David Cole will have to defend their seats at a time when the city's politicians have been on the hot seat for months.

Public angst began blowing in December when news broke that Cole failed to report on a state-mandated financial interest disclosure form that he worked for several companies doing business with the city.

Then bistrogate broke open as residents learned that Pear Street Bistro owner Gary Wong had failed to repay \$450,000 in city redevelopment loans while currying friendships with city leaders.

The recall flash point came when the City Council voted 3-2 in May to dump its city manager; critics called it payback for when the manager refused to make concessions to Wong. "That's not how you do the public's business," said Betty Boyle, the former Pinole mayor who filed the recall petition documents.

About the time the beleaguered council members predicted the recall was fizzling, an internal police memo released to the press in a public records act request described Alegria as intoxicated and mouthy while interfering with an officer engaged in a traffic stop outside the Pear Street Bistro.

On the heels of that news, recall proponents publicly flogged Cole and Tilton for missing too many meetings.

Meanwhile, all this public upheaval is taking its toll behind the scenes.

Last week, Cole told his colleagues he would rather dodge bullets in the Middle East than continue to serve on the council. (OK, that's not exactly what he said. But at age 38, he is joining the U.S. Army and taking a leave of absence.)

The political stakes are high for Alegria, too.

This was supposed to be Alegria's red-letter year, a time when she served both as her city's mayor and as the statewide president of the California League of Cities. But the news of Alegria's woes spread rapidly via the Internet, prompting some league members to worry privately that it might taint the organization.

The Pinole flap also has left local labor leaders struggling to remain neutral in this public fight between two of their own.

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Alegria directs Faith Works, an affiliation of faith, labor and community leaders under the umbrella of the Central Labor Council of Contra Costa County.

Pinole Councilman Peter Murray is a veteran leader of the IBEW and Alegria's council colleague since 1992. But he, along with Councilwoman Mary Ann Horton, support the recall.

"Pete and Maria are both really good people," said Contra Costa Building Trades Council chief Greg Feere. "We had hoped to put a lid on this recall, but it appears as though there's no room for compromise."

As one would expect, the underlying causes of Pinole's political storm are subject to disparate interpretations.

Alegria calls it a personal attack that grew out of what should have been a simple policy disagreement. Other councils have split votes and they don't end up embroiled in a recall, she said.

The mayor contends that Boyle — who helped launch the recall in June — is angry over her re-election loss in the 2006 election by 70 votes, and Horton — whose husband is the recall group's treasurer — is mad because Alegria didn't endorse her.

"This is personal vengeance at its worst," Alegria said. "It has nothing to do with policy differences ... I think what has been distressing is thinking that you know people until something like this happens."

In the other camp, recall spokesman and Pinole resident Jeff Rubin described Alegria's assertions as feeble attempts to divert voters' attention from the real problems plaguing City Hall.

"There are a lot of angry people, and they are angry for a lot of different reasons and some of them may be personal," Rubin said. "But that's not why I'm doing it. ... We have the signatures of a quarter of the city's voting population (on the recall petitions.) I can't imagine that that many people have a personal vendetta against the council."

If the past six months have been an indication of the strength of this brewing political hurricane, voters may want to hunker down for a Category 5 campaign.