

Pinole council gets an earful over city manager's ouster

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By Tom Lochner

PINOLE — Two former mayors, more than a dozen city employees and several long-time residents put the City Council to shame Tuesday night, pummeling three of its members for supposed back-room dealings and for their vote the night before to oust City Manager Belinda Espinosa.

"City business is not supposed to be made by three council members over drinks at the Pear Street Bistro," said Betty Boyle, the immediate past mayor, echoing many residents' belief that Mayor Maria Alegria and Councilmen David Cole and Stephen Tilton decided before Monday's special closed session not to renew Espinosa's contract when it expires May 31.

The council vote Monday was 3-2, with Councilwoman Mary Horton and Councilman Pete Murray dissenting; both made public statements supporting Espinosa in the days before the vote.

On Tuesday, Murray asked for reconsideration of Espinosa's termination at an upcoming meeting, but for that, one of the majority would have had to consent to place it on an agenda. None did.

Several residents at Tuesday's packed regular City Council meeting said Espinosa's ouster comes as payback for her pursuit of several hundred thousand dollars of redevelopment loans to the Pear Street Bistro that owner Gary Wong stopped paying 19 months ago. Cole and Tilton are friends of Wong's. Alegria spends a lot of time at the bistro, where she also holds official functions, including a Mayors Conference affair earlier this month.

Wong and a group of supporters were in the council chamber Monday and applauded when the closed-session decision to jettison Espinosa was announced in open session.

Former Mayor Jack Meehan called the display "disgusting," echoing the sentiments of others.

"I didn't like his flagrant way last night of shoving it in our face," resident Marcia Kalapus said.

"Last night, he was here with his friends, knowing the outcome," resident Bill Miller said.

Wong told a reporter Monday he was there to show support, but he did not elaborate and declined to comment further.

A delegation of mid-level city management employees praised Espinosa on Tuesday and asked the council to rescind Monday's decision and renew her contract.

But resident Sal Spataro, noting that he was expressing a minority view, urged the council to stick to its decision. Spataro, a plumbing contractor, has blamed Espinosa for a running feud he has had with the city over parking his truck at his house.

Pinole council gets an earful . . . 2

Over the last few months, Alegria has vowed that Wong would repay his loans and has blamed the loan default snafu on city staff. Cole has recused himself from recent council discussions of Pear Street Bistro loans. Tilton also has blamed city staff.

Espinosa's contract expires at a time of intense redevelopment activity in Pinole; current projects include a shopping center, a business park and a medical complex. The city also is involved in labor negotiations. Pinole's assistant city manager position currently is vacant.

"This Gang of Three fired the city manager at a critical time in our city," resident James Tillman said.

Tilton, in a written statement Tuesday, explained his vote the previous night, saying voters elected him because they demanded change. He also said they want term limits.

"A city manager must be a strong leader and a uniter," Tilton wrote. "I believe that allowing the city manager's contract to expire is in the best interest of Pinole.

"Pinole is a great city that we all love, which has a bright and promising future," Tilton said. "We simply need a different city manager to lead us down this path to greatness."

Earlier, Boyle had asked on what grounds the council made the decision to "fire" Espinosa.

"Belinda is the best city manager Pinole has ever had," Boyle said. She chastised the council for holding the closed session on a night when the ensuing open session was not televised.

Espinosa declined a request by the *Times* to discuss her ouster, but late Tuesday night, she made a statement of sorts: She made public a "Pear Street Bistro Chronology" of more than 200 pages.

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