

Pinole council member fights back

Alegria says recall effort is based on 'lies' in a five-minute video airing on cable television

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By Tom Lochner

Invoking the specter of the infamous late Sen. Joseph McCarthy, Pinole Councilwoman Maria Alegria lashes out in a campaign video at the sponsors of a drive to recall her, accusing them of lies, smears, threats, harassment and a witch hunt to settle a political score.

Alegria's fellow recall target, Councilman Stephen Tilton, says in his own video that Pinole has been bombarded with "a slew of lies" in a "hateful smear campaign" by "political thugs."

The videos are among seven five-minute campaign segments that started airing Wednesday on Pinole Cable TV. The other videos feature Steve Denlis and Roy Swearingen, who are vying to replace Alegria in the event a majority votes to recall her Feb. 5; Virginia Fujita, the sole replacement candidate for Tilton, should he be recalled; and Ivette Ricco and Debbie Long, who are competing for the council seat vacated when a third recall target, David Cole, resigned in August to join the U.S. Army.

Recall sponsors cried foul after interim City Manager Charlie Long rejected their requests for air time. Long, who is not related to Debbie Long, decided that only candidates should have the opportunity. Recall sponsors say Alegria and Tilton are not candidates in the usual sense but incumbents whose names appear on the ballot only in the context of a recall question. Therefore, they argue, basic fairness dictates the pro-recall side should have received equal time.

"What is so ironic about all of this is, nothing would be going on, period, if not for the recall on the ballot, yet everyone but the recall proponents get equal time and rights to media access," said Cindy Trego of Concerned Citizens of Pinole, the recall sponsor. "There are two sides to an issue."

Alegria, in her video, says, "Fortunately, the witch hunts of the 1950s came to an end when somebody stood up and said, 'Have you no shame, Senator Joseph McCarthy? Have you no sense of decency?' Finally, somebody was willing to stand up to the bullies.

"Well today, many people are standing up to the recall bullies here in Pinole. Senator Tom Torlakson has stood up and said, 'Have you no shame?' Assembly members Mark DeSaulnier and Loni Hancock have stood up and said, 'Have you no shame?'"

Jeff Rubin, spokesman for Concerned Citizens of Pinole, said Alegria should "reread the history of the McCarthy era."

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"Calling people vicious, vile liars and thugs — those are all words Senator McCarthy used, except he was calling people communists," Rubin said.

"(Alegria is) actually the McCarthy character in her own scenario," he said.

Last week, DeSaulnier said he does not believe a recall is a good idea in general. "We have elections," he said. "I have been supportive of Maria Alegria in the past and continue to be."

DeSaulnier said he was "not the author of the language" that Alegria used in the video, which he had not seen, and added, "It wouldn't be my choice of words.

"I understand the tone of the campaign is very emotional — on both sides," DeSaulnier said. "I think that it's best we be careful about the language we use in elections."

Rubin said it should be no surprise that an elected official would come out against recalls.

"He or she might one day be subject to one," Rubin said.

Hancock did not respond to requests for comment. Torlakson said he supports Alegria as a longtime friend, supporter and an "effective and excellent leader."

Tilton and Alegria were targeted originally over their friendship with a local restaurateur who failed for two years to make payments on more than \$400,000 in city loans and for their part in a majority council vote in May not to renew the contract of former City Manager Belinda Espinosa.

The recall sponsors also accuse Alegria of throwing lavish city-sponsored functions at the delinquent restaurant; a cozy relationship with a developer; bullying city staff members; and interfering in a traffic stop outside the restaurant during which three police officers described her as drunk. Alegria says she was not drunk and that the officers misunderstood her intention, which she says was only to act as translator between police and the motorist. Recall sponsors accuse both council members of lacking accountability and refusing to answer questions from the public.

In the other five videos, the various office-seekers highlight aspects of their personal and professional experience: Denlis, a machine shop owner; Swearingen, a construction consultant, former mayor and retired sheet-metal company owner; Fujita, a Pinole homeowner for almost 30 years; Ricco, member of the Design Review Board, former executive director of the Pinole Chamber of Commerce and former official with a student loan collections company; and Long, a planning commissioner, member of numerous other boards and manager of a medical group.

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