

Mailer riles city official

PINOLE: Manager calls attack on former leader ‘mean spirited’

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By Tom Lochner

Pinole interim City Manager Charlie Long has denounced a mailer that uses his name while it trashes former City Manager Belinda Espinosa, calling it “mean-spirited” and “one of the most offensive pieces of political literature I have ever seen in my life.”

The mailer, which urges a “no” vote on a recall of City Council members Maria Alegria and Stephen Tilton, was sponsored by the Central Labor Council of Contra Costa County, which in a news release Monday accused recall sponsors of falsely attributing the piece to Alegria’s campaign.

“That’s not my campaign flier,” Alegria said Monday. “I have my own message. I have no authority over what other people say.”

Kevin Reikes, her campaign manager, did not return calls.

Recall sponsors initially took aim at Alegria and Tilton for their part in a 3-2 council majority that voted in May to let Espinosa go at the end of her contract, and for what they say is the duo’s cozy relationship with Pear Street Bistro owner Gary Wong, who for two years failed to make payments on more than \$400,000 in city loans.

The mailer, which Pinole voters received late last week, blames Espinosa for the Pear Street Bistro loan fiasco; for a supposed “unlawful payment scheme” related to an Old Town mixed-use project; and for the city’s failure to collect more than \$300,000 on a ground lease at Gateway West. The mailer cites Long’s city manager reports as the source for statements on Gateway West and the Old Town project, and city records were combined with a chronology by Espinosa as the source for a statement on the bistro.

“It angered me, and the reason it did is it used me,” Long said. “It misrepresented information that I have been giving to the community, and it used that misrepresentation to go after someone in a really mean, nasty way.

“The fact that it used my name — I found that very offensive.”

Recall sponsor Concerned Citizens of Pinole, in a response flier, says the issue is the way Espinosa was terminated — precipitously, with no assistant city manager in place and with a severance package that the city did not have to pay under her contract; some recall supporters have called the package “hush money.” The severance agreement includes a mutual nondisparage clause, common in severance agreements. Espinosa has cited the clause in refusing requests for comment; Alegria and Tilton

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have cited it as well, saying that it hampers them in their defense against the recall, although they have criticized Espinosa in several statements to the media.

The response flier also denies that Espinosa is at fault for the missing ground-lease payments. The Times reported in October that the lease, with developer TKG, was not booked into the city's accounts-receivable ledger when it was signed in 2003, before Espinosa became city manager.

The supposed "unlawful payment" refers to a private agreement between developer Brian Hirahara and Bear Claw Bakery owner Mike Stott that would have given Stott \$150,000 not to oppose Starbucks moving into Old Town Center. Long has said it would be unlawful to use redevelopment funds to pay for the agreement, which was never consummated.

The labor flier also implicitly blames Espinosa for the bistro fiasco, saying she waited until September 2006 to report the delinquency to the entire City Council. Recall supporters point out, however, that five months later, Alegria, in a Times opinion piece, argued against foreclosing on Wong. Moreover, they note, Alegria continued to book city banquets at the bistro about that time.

Alegria and Tilton have said that recall backers have distorted their relationship with Wong. Alegria devoted a mailer to denounce a photo on Concerned Citizens of Pinole's Web site showing Alegria, Tilton and Wong smiling together at a table during a small-business awards dinner in San Pablo, because the photo does not show Planning Commissioner Maureen Toms, a fourth member of the Pinole delegation.

Addressing the matter at a City Council meeting last week, Rubin said, "How could you have the gall to have a photograph taken with (Wong) when he was holding up the city, and then have the nerve to complain that someone's image was removed from it?"

The group cites many examples of what they deem the "cozy" relationship between Wong and the two City Council members, citing the fact that Wong held musical events at the bistro in apparent violation of his state liquor license, even while Alegria was inside.

The music stopped shortly after a brawl in May, which involved patrons pelting police with bottles, came to the attention of the state Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control. An administrative law judge is supposed to hold a hearing in Martinez today on five alleged violations of Wong's liquor license.

In June, Wong rode in the car of San Francisco Sheriff Mike Hennessey in a parade at the invitation of Tilton, who is a San Francisco sheriff's lieutenant. Tilton has said that Wong was only one of 10 or 12 guests from Pinole that he invited to the parade that day.

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