

Mailer escalates tensions in Pinole

Anti-recall pamphlet asserts there are no qualified candidates to replace councilmembers

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By Tom Lochner

A mailer with recommendations for the Feb. 5 election urges voters to “Vote NO on the Revenge Recall” of Pinole City Council members Maria Alegria and Stephen Tilton, adding:

“Officially, there are no qualified replacement candidates.”

The Contra Costa County Election office has certified Roy Swearingen and Steve Denlis as replacement candidates for Alegria in the event she receives less than 50 percent voter support to continue in office. Virginia Fujita is the lone replacement candidate for Tilton.

The mailer, which uses Statue of Liberty or American Eagle imagery similar to some governmental publications, is political advertisement produced under the title “Voter Information Guide” and is distinct from the Voter Information Guide issued by the California Secretary of State.

“I think it’s disgusting,” said Patty McGoldrick, a Pinole resident who received one of the mailers. “This is a piece of advertisement disguised as something official.”

The guide is produced by Larry Levine and Associates of Sherman Oaks, a Levine employee who identified himself as Devin confirmed that the company produced it.

Asterisks behind the entries “Recall: Maria Alegria — NO” and a similar one for Tilton indicate the “candidates” or their representatives paid for the entry, Devin said — technically, the two are not candidates but incumbents facing recall. An asterisk behind “Protect Pinole” indicates a group by that name paid also, Devin said. He deferred inquiries about the statement regarding the nonexistence of qualified candidates to another Levine representative, who did not call back.

Tilton, reached by telephone Thursday, said he had not spent any money on any mailers.

“I didn’t know (the Levine mailer) was coming out, but I’m glad there’s mail coming out advocating for no on the recall,” he said.

He said he had not seen the mailer and could not comment on its contents.

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Alegria said she was unaware of the mailer and asked a reporter to fax her a copy.

“I don’t know who paid for this voter information guide,” she said later, adding “I’m proud to have the support of the Democratic Party among other groups opposing the recall.”

Fujita, echoing critiques from several other residents, said the mailer is confusing, and that it isn’t clear whether it denies the existence of “official” candidates or merely gives an opinion about their qualifications.

“I thought it was kind of a joke,” Fujita said. “My first thought was, I am more qualified than Stephen Tilton was in November 2006,” when he ran as a first-time candidate.

In other recall-related developments:

- Pinole Police said they are forwarding to the Contra Costa District Attorney the case of a San Pablo resident employed at the Pear Street Bistro whom they arrested on suspicion of petty theft shortly after midnight Wednesday after he admitted removing pro-recall campaign signs from a shopping center across the street.

“There is no indication that (the suspect) was doing anything but operating independently,” said Pinole Police Cmdr. Paul Clancy.

Clancy also said that bistro owner Gary Wong called police minutes after the sign-removal incident outside the bistro to report that a sign promoting Ivette Ricco, who is running for an empty seat on the council, had disappeared from outside his home. Police are treating that incident as a case of petty theft, Clancy said.

- Comcast was supposed to start airing a 30-second television spot against the recall commissioned by the Central Labor Council of Contra Costa.

The spot echoes a recent mailer by Friends of Maria Alegria, with virtually the same opening script, “A picture is worth a thousand words (especially if you’re willing to lie).”

It accuses recall sponsors of “doctoring” a photo of Alegria, Tilton and Wong by cropping out a fourth person, a planning commissioner who was with the trio at an awards dinner. Wong, at the time, was delinquent in his payments on several hundred thousand dollars of city loans.

“It highlights an example of how the recall group has been manipulating the facts in order to smear Maria Alegria and Stephen Tilton,” Labor Council Executive Director Pam Aguilar said Thursday.

Jeff Rubin of Concerned Citizens of Pinole said he cropped out the planning commissioner to spare her embarrassment.

“The photograph still shows Maria, Gary and Stephen smiling, sitting side by side, having a good time,” Rubin said. “It’s clear that these people have a special relationship.”