

ASHLAND DAILY TIDINGS

Guest Opinion: Councilor's clouded judgment

By Carol Voisin

Posted at 12:01 AM

In his Nov. 16 Council Corner column, Ashland City Councilor Rich Rosenthal objects to citizens' effort to recall three commissioners serving on Ashland's Parks and Recreation Commission. Rather than recalling commissioners for cause, Rosenthal urges citizens to make a greater effort to become more involved in the decision-making process.

At issue is the imperious manner in which the APRC decided on the fate of Ashland's Senior Center and its staff. At every step in their decision-making process, citizens fought to speak, to reason with commissioners, and forge compromise actions less damaging to the center's programs and its senior clients than the actions under consideration.

At meetings where the issue was on the announced agenda, there was such a large citizen turnout reflecting unanimous opposition that many were turned away. Citizens followed up on their concerns by writing letters to the editor, hosting meetings at the library and contacting councilors and commissioners to express their views. They raised issues regarding the urgent nature of seniors' needs. They requested mediation, urged the commission to hold public forums to gather more information, and called attention to actions of unqualified replacement staff. Finally, they organized a recall when all other efforts fell on deaf ears.

It is, in fact, difficult to imagine any recent local issue that has evoked greater citizen interest and more involvement than this one. When Councilor Rosenthal urges greater "civil, constructive discourse," he is barking up the same tree citizens have been circling for months. But by definition, discourse is a give and take proposition, not a one-sided matter of decree.

At every step, citizens have been stiff-armed by APRC staff and commissioners. When the final decision was handed down by the APRC, nowhere in APRC's decision was there a scintilla of accommodation to citizens' concerns. These elected public servants have essentially lost sight of those they serve.

Moreover, some public meetings on the Senior Center were not adequately publicized, clearly violating Oregon state public meeting law and spirit. When citizens showed up to speak, they were often denied or condescended to with "I know change is scary." Commissioners had clearly already made up their minds, long before public hearings began. Finally, when citizens tried in a last desperate attempt to reason with the APRC and offer suggestions for how the decision might be amended or improved, they were again dismissed; by then the decision was a done deal.

The action by citizens to circulate recall petitions for three APRC commissioners came after careful thought and after every alternative had been exhausted. The action is taken with no animosity toward the commissioners or staff. Recall clearly does not "pit citizen against citizen;" Ashlanders have been nearly unanimous in their disapproval of APRC's actions from the start. It does pit citizens against those in power – but only because those in power have failed to listen and accommodate the concerns of citizens.

The grounds for the recall are: (1) fiscal mismanagement on the part of the APRC, (2) abrogation of public meeting laws, and (3) arbitrary firing of highly qualified, well-performing Senior Center staff without due process. Additionally, as further evidence of fiscal mismanagement, the APRC voted to undertake plans for a \$3.5 million swimming pool complex without requiring a feasibility study. They voted to spend \$230,000 for a Lithia Park "master plan" study without significant citizen input. All the while, APRC is facing serious operating cost overruns, projected to grow to over \$1,619,000 by 2023.

Perhaps the fact that Councilor Rosenthal once served on the APRC himself has clouded his judgment, and perhaps it is further clouded by the fact that he is now employed by the city of Medford as, yes, its director of parks and recreation.

With this recall, citizens are simply saying that every other avenue available to them was blocked. This is not the Ashland way. We hope readers will sign the petitions and in 2018, vote for the recall.

For more information on the recall go to www.AshlandRecall.com.

— Carol Voisin was a member of the Ashland City Council from 2008 to 2016.