

## NO WITCH-HUNTS!

Here in Pacifica, some very ugly things have happened in the past few weeks. Now is the time for us to come together as a community and support our councilmembers who are under attack by out-of-town interests.

Sue Digre, city councilmember and former mayor, was the subject of an April 4 anonymous letter to the city attorney and state attorney general. The letter writer said Digre has “potentially perjured herself and committed voter fraud in seven elections,” and that the city must “explore prosecution.” Who accuses Digre of these serious acts? We don’t know. The accuser remains anonymous “for fear of retribution to myself and my family.” That’s an inflammatory accusation in itself; a principle of American law is being able to question your accuser.

The anonymous accuser has been very busy. At the April 24 council meeting, seven people spoke in support of these allegations, some carrying “recall” signs. Several accusers don’t live in Pacifica, and half are out-of-town realtors. When councilmember Vaterlaus asked for the city attorney’s opinion, Michelle Kenyon responded, “There’s nothing that legally requires at this point, that we’re aware of, that councilmember Digre resign from her position.”

Those denouncing Digre at the council meeting said she was under investigation, as if that meant these bogus charges were being taken seriously. The San Mateo County District Attorney’s Office is required to look into any accusations made.

Councilmember Digre says she welcomes the investigation, believing it’s always appropriate to protect the public’s interests. Clearly, the accuser wants Digre off the council so she cannot participate in council votes on hot-button topics such as not widening Highway 1 and a temporary rent stabilization moratorium. In both cases, Digre voted with the majority in 3-2 decisions. With Digre gone, the council would deadlock 2-2, providing the end to many of these decisions until the next election. The anonymous accuser and the pro-recall people are trying to bully their way into getting their desired outcomes when they don’t have the votes to get their way fairly.

I have obtained from the city a copy of a public records request it received on April 17 from Joshua Howard of the California Apartment Association. It requests any correspondence, including personal and city emails, of councilmembers John Keener, Deirdre Martin, and Sue Digre relating to rent stabilization. These councilmembers voted to approve a temporary moratorium on certain residential rent increases, and to require just cause for eviction of tenants. Each supports putting a rent stabilization ordinance on the November ballot. Interestingly, the request does not include correspondence from the other two councilmembers, Mayor Mike O’Neill and Councilmember Sue Vaterlaus. O’Neill and Vaterlaus voted **against** the temporary moratorium and just-cause eviction. According to O’Neill’s and Vaterlaus’ 2015 Fair Political Practices Commission Statements of Economic Interests (on the city website), both are real estate agents, and Vaterlaus is also a Pacifica landlord and property management business owner.

Connecting the dots, we see that the three councilmembers who voted in favor of the temporary moratorium on certain residential rent increases and just-cause eviction received the public records request from the California Apartment Association about rent stabilization communications. The two councilmembers who are realtors, and who didn't support the temporary rent stabilization moratorium, did not receive the public records requests.

The California Apartment Association's motive appears to be a fishing expedition to try to uncover something that would discredit Keener, Digre, and/or Martin. As with the unfounded accusations against Digre, the goal seems to be to force one of these three councilmembers to resign or recuse herself/himself.

The basic principle of the California Public Records Act is that government records will be disclosed to the public, on request, unless there is a specific reason not to disclose. It can be used to shine a light on government practices, but can also be misused as a witch-hunting exercise designed to embarrass or harass elected officials. This seems to be the case here because the request was only to councilmembers voting **for** rent stabilization.

The use of anonymous, unproven accusations of conduct that is neither illegal nor unethical to discredit and remove Digre is a desperate move by the out-of-town real estate industry to get its way. The out-of-town real estate industry spent \$91,000 in the November election. Not able to buy the election, it is now resorting to bullying tactics. Councilmember Sue Digre has worked tirelessly for our community for many years, focusing on the issues and taking the high ground. The intent of Digre, Keener, and Martin is to protect and support some of the most vulnerable Pacificans, clearly not the intent of the California Apartment Association. Underhanded tactics don't serve our democratic process. I call on all Pacificans to stand with our councilmembers as they are under this unethical attack.

**Chaya Gordon**

*This op-ed originally appeared as a "My Turn" guest column in the Pacifica Tribune, May 17.*