

## Council Wants Stanton Out

By CARLOS MONCADA The Tampa Tribune

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LARGO - Saying they had lost confidence in his ability to lead, a majority of city commissioners took the first step Tuesday night toward firing longtime City Manager Steve Stanton, less than a week after he announced he is preparing for a sex change.

After a nearly four-hour meeting in front of an overflow crowd, commissioners voted 5-2 to approve a preliminary resolution terminating Stanton's employment contract.

Stanton will be placed on paid administrative leave until the commission takes an as-yet-unscheduled vote on a final resolution. Commissioners will discuss filling the top administrative post at a workshop July 10. Assistant City Manager Matt Craig was named interim city manager.

"It's just real painful to know that seven days ago I was a good guy," Stanton told commissioners before the vote. "And now I have no integrity, I have no trust, I have no confidence. And more significantly, I have no followers."

Stanton will have an opportunity to appeal the commission's decision, said Mayor Pat Gerard, his most vocal supporter on the commission.

"I firmly stand by my city manager who has demonstrated unbending loyalty to this city," Gerard said. "I'll be embarrassed if we throw this man on the trash heap."

Yet most commissioners and a slight majority of speakers who paraded before them said they had lost confidence in Stanton and questioned his ability to make decisions for the good of the city.

"I do not have any doubt that Mr. Stanton can still do the job," Commissioner Gay Gentry said. "But it seems that he's lost his standing as a leader among the employees of the city."

Commissioner Andy Guyette said, "I feel I can no longer trust his judgment."

Commissioner Mary Black requested Tuesday's meeting and offered the resolution to end Stanton's contract "in the best interest of the city." Black said Stanton's disclosure of his impending sex change "has caused stress, turmoil, distraction and work disruption to our city employees."

Stanton, 48, announced last week that he is undergoing counseling and hormone therapy in preparation for a sex-change operation this year. He plans to take the name

Susan, which he said his mother would have called him had he been born a girl.

The 14-year city manager said it was his intent to keep his \$140,000-a-year job and received support from Gerard and other top officials.

The disclosure made national news and rocked this landlocked Pinellas County city of 75,000 between St. Petersburg and Clearwater. City hall was flooded with hundreds of calls and e-mail from residents, both supportive and critical.

Stanton, married with a 13-year-old son, serves at the pleasure of the commission and can be fired "with or without cause" by a vote of five out of seven officials on the commission.

The overflow crowd at Tuesday's meeting filled the commission chambers and several other rooms at city hall where the meeting was televised.

Supporters said Stanton should be judged on his job performance, not his decision to change his gender. Opponents said they had lost confidence in Stanton and questioned his morals, ethics and ability to make decisions for the good of the city.

Extra police officers were on hand, although the crowd was mostly orderly.

Nadine Smith, director of the gay rights group Equality Florida who spoke in support of Stanton, was taken into custody after police said she became "uncooperative" when told to stop handing out fliers.

Stanton's contract provides for 12 months' severance pay if he is fired for any reason other than a felony conviction, an ethics violation or other "gross misconduct."


Stanton said he does not plan to take legal action against the city but added, "I need to reflect on ... where do I go from here."

**Reporter Steve Kornacki contributed to this report.**

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