



Largo officials bow to mob, prejudice

By A TIMES EDITORIAL

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The Largo community and most of its elected officials turned on City Manager Steve Stanton and kicked him to the curb Tuesday night, less than a week after learning that he plans a sex-change operation. That they made an attempt to link their decision to issues other than his gender orientation only makes their action more offensive. They accused him of lacking integrity, honesty, professionalism and leadership, but their treatment of him Tuesday night grew out of prejudice, misinformation and religious intolerance.

Stanton committed no crime. He was not guilty of corruption or failure to do his job. He had worked for the city of Largo for almost 17 years, 14 of them as city manager, and until a week ago he had earned the support of the public and most of the city commissioners he had served during those years. The current commission praised him in his most recent evaluation and gave him a big raise.

But in what must have been an especially bitter moment for Stanton, that support evaporated Tuesday night. By a vote of 5 to 2, commissioners hurried to put him on administrative leave, planned a required second vote to affirm his firing and appointed an interim city manager.

Commissioners had received hundreds of e-mails and phone calls from Largo residents who disapproved of Stanton's very personal decision to undergo gender-reassignment surgery. Tuesday night's special commission meeting was a spectacle, with almost 500 people jamming City Hall and many of them demanding that commissioners oust Stanton.

Some cited religious reasons for their disapproval, with one speaker even saying he could "guarantee" that Jesus would want Stanton terminated. When did Jesus ever lead a mob? Others accused the city manager of being immoral because he was going to change his gender, or deceitful because he didn't reveal his plans to the public sooner. But the attitudes on display in Largo the past week provided the perfect illustration of why Stanton wanted to keep his personal struggles quiet until he was sure of his decision and had developed a good plan to unveil it.

The only commissioners who stood by Stanton were Rodney Woods, the city's first African-American commissioner, and Mayor Pat Gerard, the city's first female mayor. Gerard, who did a good job of controlling the meeting, was especially eloquent, saying it is hard to stand up for people who are different, but she was asking Largo to do it.

"I believe we have the future of this city in our hands tonight," she said. "I think we're ready."

Sadly, she was wrong.