



Largo officials vote to dismiss Stanton

By LORRI HELFAND

Published February 28, 2007

LARGO - City commissioners ended one of the most tumultuous weeks in Largo history Tuesday night by moving to fire City Manager Steve Stanton following his disclosure that he will have a sex-change operation.

A total of 480 people packed City Hall for a four-hour meeting during which one activist was arrested after police told her not to hand out fliers.

After listening to about 60 speakers, mostly from Largo, a majority of commissioners said they had lost confidence in Stanton's ability to lead.

"His brain is the same today as it was last week," Commissioner Gay Gentry said. "He may be even able to be a better city manager. But I sense that he's lost his standing as a leader among the employees of the city."

Commissioners voted 5-2, with Mayor Pat Gerard and Commissioner Rodney Woods in dissent, to place Stanton on paid leave while his departure is made final.

"I'm going to be embarrassed if we throw this man out on the trash heap after he's worked so hard for the city," Gerard said before the vote. "We have a choice to make: We can go back to intolerance, or we can be the city of progress."

Woods chastised fellow commissioners, saying he had a hard time accepting that they didn't consider Stanton's recent choice to become a woman when they decided he was unfit to lead.

After the vote, Stanton, 48, left the meeting without comment. Later, he told the St. Petersburg Times that the "commission did what they felt was best for the community."

But, he said, commissioners voted before getting a full understanding of what a transsexual must confront when this kind of secret is disclosed.

During the meeting, Stanton described the dismay of watching his professional reputation disintegrate in just seven days.

Until last week, he had served 14 years as the city manager, generally to good reviews. Last fall, commissioners raised his salary nearly 9 percent to \$140,234 a year.

But on Feb. 21, the Times reported that Stanton was undergoing hormone therapy in preparation for gender-reassignment surgery - a plan known only to a small circle of people, including his wife, medical team and a few top officials at City Hall.

Stanton and his friends had written an eight-page plan to help make his decision known in June, when he said his 13-year-old son could be out of town and shielded from the publicity.

Instead, the news came out before he told his son. Outraged residents swarmed commissioners, demanding he be ousted.

"It's just real painful to know that seven days ago I was a good guy and now I have no integrity, I have no trust and most painful, I have no followers," Stanton said.

But he also indicated he does not plan to sue the city.

"In so many ways I am Largo," Stanton told commissioners. "It's like suing my mother."

* * *

The past week's controversy set the stage for Tuesday night's special meeting, called by Commissioner Mary Gray Black.

The scene outside City Hall was calm as people filed into the building before the meeting, though some said that they had witnessed heated debates earlier in the evening.

Peggy Schaefer was one of about 60 members of the First Baptist Church of Indian Rocks who turned out for the meeting.

"I don't want that man in office," she said. "I don't think we should be paying him \$150,000 a year when he's not been truthful. We have to speak up. Of course, we don't believe in sex changes or lesbianism. They have their rights, but we do, too."

But Stanton's supporters urged commissioners to stand up to the backlash and to judge him based on his performance.

"I'm proud to be part of a Largo that would oppose this resolution and put hatred and bigotry back in the 1950s where it belonged," Largo business owner Keith Winn said.

A half-hour after the meeting began, there were two dozen people out front, listening and occasionally cheering at comments being made inside.

Inside the lobby, about 100 people watched the proceedings on closed-circuit television monitors.

That's where Nadine Smith, the executive director of Equality Florida, a gay and lesbian advocacy group, was arrested after an officer told her not to hand out fliers.

Charlie Deppish of Tampa said he asked Smith if he could have one of her pink sheets of paper that said "Don't discriminate" in bold black letters.

As Smith handed Deppish a flier, an officer asked her not to do that.

Why, Smith said, repeating the question several times.

Within seconds, she was pulled down a hallway through double doors and taken to the floor by four officers.

Smith, 41, of St. Petersburg was restrained after becoming combative and refusing to calm down, police said. She was charged with resisting arrest with violence, a felony, and disturbing others' assembly, a misdemeanor.

* * *

After placing Stanton on leave, commissioners voted to make assistant city manager Norton "Mac" Craig acting city manager.

Stanton said he did not know what his next step will be. For the past week, he said he has not slept more than two hours a night.

Tuesday morning, for example, Stanton said he woke up about 2 a.m., wrote in his journal for about 2 1/2 hours and went for a two-hour run.

After that, he took his son, Travis, 13, to school and talked to him about courage.

Stanton then went to church - he wouldn't say where - and took a long walk to prepare himself for that night's meeting. It wasn't easy after receiving so many angry messages from the community he has given so much passion to, he said.

"There is such a sensationalized level of hysteria that people stop thinking and they react emotionally," he said.

In the morning, he went to City Hall for a series of meetings, but decided it wasn't really fair to hold those meetings until the situation was behind him one way or another.

Even though Stanton knew he might not return to work today, he didn't say goodbye to his employees before Tuesday night's meeting.

Stanton spoke with the mayor and kept a previously scheduled appointment with Commissioner Rodney Woods, but he didn't lobby commissioners for his job.

"They're in extremely difficult position. These folks are my friends," Stanton said before the meeting.

"No matter what happens tonight they'll each be my friends afterward."

Times staff writers Rita Farlow and Jacob H. Fries and Clearwater managing editor Joe Childs contributed to this report. Lorri Helfand can be reached at lorri@sptimes.com or 727 445-4155.

What they're saying

"The issue is not the gender change here. It's the fact that he deceived people. He wasn't honest with us."

- Bob Goss, Largo resident

"His brain is the same today as it was last week. ... He may be even able to be a better city manager. But I sense that he's lost his standing as a leader among the employees of the city."

- Commissioner Gay Gentry

"Mr. Stanton is not a role model. He's proven that. I think for the sake of our young people today, you need to do what's right, and that's terminate him. ... If Jesus was here tonight, I can guarantee you he'd want him terminated. Make no mistake about it."

- Ron Sanders, pastor, Lighthouse Baptist Church of Largo

What they said

Fast Facts:

"Do not give in to extreme pressure, because there is such a thing as the tyranny of the majority. ... Make this judgment based on sound ethics, compassion, humanity, and truly show commitment to diversity."

- the Rev. Abhi Janamanchi, senior minister, Unitarian Universalists of Clearwater

"Mr. Stanton's primary goal is taking care of Mr. Stanton. That's what he's doing. I think it's time for you to take care of Largo and remove him."

- Largo attorney and longtime Stanton critic Bruce McManus

"People talk about being embarrassed. I'll tell you what: I'm going to be embarrassed if we throw this man out on the trash heap after he's worked so hard for the city. ... We have a choice to make: We can go back to intolerance, or we can be the city of progress."

- Mayor Pat Gerard

"I just cannot support this resolution. It's not something that's inside of me."

- City Commissioner Rodney Woods

"The city has had its share of controversy, and over time your handling of issues and continued education should have prepared you for last week's event. In observation of your management style last week, I knew things had to change."

- Vice Mayor Harriet Crozier

"It's just real painful to know that seven days ago I was a good guy and now I have no integrity, I have no trust and most painful, I have no followers. ... If this is the end, and this is the reason for it, I'm going to feel sorry for myself for about a day or so, then go out and celebrate because it's been a great experience. ... Hopefully after all this is behind us, we'll be better for it."

- City Manager Steve Stanton

Stanton's severance package

Under a resolution filed by Commissioner Mary Gray Black and the terms of his contract, Steve Stanton's severance will consist of:

- 12 months pay totaling \$140,234.
- About 550 hours of accrued vacation time.
- Health, life and disability insurance benefits and contributions to his retirement accounts for that period.

Officials could not say Tuesday what the total cost of those benefits would be.

Stanton time line

1958: born Steve Stanton; raised in the Catskill Mountains of New York. He has said his desire to become female started in childhood.

1990: hired as assistant city manager in Largo; marries his wife, Donna.

September 1993: named Largo city manager.

2003: Largo commissioners reject human rights ordinance that would have protected city residents from discrimination targeted at gays, lesbians or transgender people.

Stanton begins to discuss his private life with a therapist who testified in support of the ordinance. That led to his decision to seriously consider becoming a woman.

Feb. 20, 2007: In response to inquiries from the St. Petersburg Times, Stanton discloses that he is undergoing hormone treatments in preparation for gender-reassignment surgery.

Tuesday night - After a special meeting lasting nearly four hours, city commissioners vote to place Stanton on paid leave while the terms of his termination are completed.

© 2007 • All Rights Reserved • St. Petersburg Times
490 First Avenue South • St. Petersburg, FL 33701 • 727-893-8111