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Hanson cleared of allegations

DHS council votes to oust Alex Bias from 2 city boards

By Jose Paul Corona
 The Desert Sun
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DESERT HOT SPRINGS – City Manager Jerry Hanson has been cleared of conflict-of-interest allegations made against him last month.

City Attorney Charles Green told nearly 100 residents at Tuesday night's City Council meeting that the council voted 4-1 in closed session to stop any "further investigation" or "further action" into the matter.

Councilman Gary Bosworth cast the sole dissenting vote.

During the meeting, Bosworth said he was "saddened" by the actions the council took during closed session.

Mayor Matt Weyuker greeted those in attendance and apologized for having the meeting start nearly 15 minutes late.

"I hope you find this meeting as interesting as the media has made it out to be," Weyuker said.

A special review committee made up of Councilman Will Pieper and Councilwoman Mary Stephens found that Hanson did nothing wrong.

The conflict-of-interest allegations against Hanson were first made during a July 7 meeting of the City Council.

At issue was an \$8,600 contract the council entered into with Riverside-based Tyco Fire and Security, where Hanson's son, Justin Hanson, works installing security cameras.

Other possible conflicts had come to light since the original allegations were made.

While Hanson had insisted that he did nothing wrong, he had remained silent at the advice of legal counsel.

Pieper and Stephens also had remained silent on the allegations, citing the fact that the investigation is a personnel issue that by law cannot be discussed.

During its closed session, the council also voted 4-1 to remove Alex Bias from the city's economic development commission and from the city's beautification committee.

Bosworth also cast the sole dissenting vote on that matter.

Bias, who had served as the chairman of the economic development commission since January, publicly had asked the council to place Hanson on administrative leave while the

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conflict-of-interest allegations against him were investigated.

During the public comment portion of Tuesday's meeting, Karl Baker, a current City Council candidate, described the council's action against Bias as "political vindictiveness."

Baker also reiterated that he felt the conflict-of-interest allegations he brought to light against Hanson were "an egregious breach of ethics."

The city's ethics code states that city employees cannot engage in any business or transaction in which they have a personal or financial interest. That, in part, is defined as relationships by blood or marriage.

Baker went on to say that every city employee has to abide by that code and that if the council would not go by the code, the council needed to "change the code."

Baker said by allowing Hanson to not follow the code, the council was giving itself permission to disregard it.

"That's inappropriate, Mr. Baker. You're attacking this council," Weyuker said. "Sit down."

Before public comments, Weyuker asked residents to "refrain" from personal attacks.

When Baker continued to speak after being told to sit down, Councilman Greg Ruppert asked Police Chief Roy Hill to remove Baker.

"You're attacking personnel, Mr. Baker. You know better than that," Weyuker said.

Baker voluntarily left the meeting when Hill stood up to remove him.

"They kicked me out," Baker said.

"I do not feel for a minute that I attacked them," Baker said in response to Weyuker's claims. "I was just trying to bring out the facts. Is that attacking?"

Bias said he was "not surprised" by the council's decision that Hanson had done nothing wrong. "You would not expect a mayor to condemn himself or his decisions."

Bias said by finding that Hanson had done something wrong, the council would have admitted that it made the wrong decision by making Hanson the city manager.

Hanson previously had served as the city's engineer and director of public works.

Tad Lonergan, a Thousand Palms resident and doctor who has a family practice in Desert Hot Springs, said he supports Hanson and blamed Bias for causing "divisiveness" in the city.

"It's been embarrassing to all of us," Lonergan said.

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