

Restoring order in Athol

Embezzlement case continues; recall effort falls short

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ATHOL - Order is gradually being restored at Athol City Hall, the town's mayor said.

"It's nice to have a breather," said Mayor Darla Kuhman, referring to a series of developments this summer, including an embezzlement case, a recall effort and recent new hires.

Lori Yarbrough, who formerly worked at the Idaho Department of Labor in Post Falls, has been appointed as the new city clerk.

She replaces Sally Hansen, who was fired in July and is a person of interest in an embezzlement case involving city funds. Hansen had served as Athol's clerk since 2009.

Yarbrough has a bachelor's degree in urban and regional planning and a master's degree in public administration. "I believe that (education) will assist the city in its future growth," Kuhman said.

Tamie Cunningham, who served as the clerk while Hansen's replacement was sought, will stay at the city as a deputy clerk.

"She has been instrumental to me in providing assistance with putting the files in order and following instructions to assist in the investigation," Kuhman said. "By having additional staff, I believe that having a good check-and-balance system will be in place.

"With the previous system, our city lacked the segregation of duties that are necessary to provide adequate security. Total transparency is important at this point."

Kuhman said the deputy clerk job is not new, but hasn't been filled since last spring.

Kuhman said she expects results of an audit to be released in four to six weeks. No charges have been filed in the embezzlement case, which is being investigated by the Kootenai County Sheriff's Office.

The KCSO received a letter in July from a local law firm, advising it has been retained by Hansen and that she "will be exercising her right to remain silent."

Hansen and her husband, Chuck, who was the lead grounds employee for the Lakeland Joint School District and served as a Timberlake Fire Protection District commissioner, fled the area after Hansen was fired, detectives said. Chuck resigned from his Lakeland job and has been a no-show at fire board meetings for the past three months. The Timberlake board on Monday night declared Hansen's Zone 5 seat vacant.

"The reason we declared it vacant is that he has had no contact with the district for 90 days," said Rudy Rudebaugh, commission chairman.

Rudebaugh said Hansen was sent a certified letter by the district to his Athol-area home, but it was returned as undeliverable.

Rudebaugh said the district will advertise for the position and the deadline for letters of interest is Nov. 12. He said interviews will be conducted on Nov. 17 and Hansen's replacement will be chosen thereafter.

Zone 5 is between Clagstone and Ramsey, south of Highway 54 and north of Corbin Hill. The replacement will fill the seat for three years.

"We look forward to getting the commission vacancy filled and moving forward," Rudebaugh said.

Not moving forward is Athol resident Susan Richmond's petition to have a recall of Athol City Council members Mary Zichko, Josh Spencer and Shane McDaniel on the November ballot.

"The petitioners did not meet the required number of signatures for the three recall petitions so there will not be a recall election for Athol in November," Kootenai County Elections Manager Carrie Phillips wrote in an email.

Richmond claimed the council members were slow to get to the bottom of the embezzlement allegations. She also accused them of holding illegal meetings.

Kuhman said neighboring agencies have assisted Athol by offering advice during its bumpy summer. "I can't express enough gratitude for helping us out," she said.

She said Athol is still working through accounting issues with past water bills on some residents' accounts. Kuhman said part of the problem is that water payment information is on computers that are being examined for the embezzlement case.

"The water bills are a work in progress," she said. "We're taking names and numbers and will try to reconstruct things as best as possible. Hopefully things will level out in the next month or so."