

Monday, July 05, 2010

Sparks Fly at Socorro Co-Op

<http://www.abqjournal.com/biz/05202039biz07-05-10.htm>

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The most recent meeting of the Socorro Electric Cooperative Board of Trustees quickly turned into a shouting match and soon thereafter was canceled when member-owners refused to leave for executive session and police were called to the scene.

Co-op President Paul Bustamante said he felt the display of passive resistance by more than a dozen member-owners was premeditated and created a hostile environment at the June 23 meeting.

"We pretty much knew that this was going to go on. We can't conduct business like this," he said in the parking lot outside the board room, while police urged everyone to go home.

About 17 people, some of them wearing T-shirts that read "Socorro Electric Cooperative Member-Owner and My Vote Counts," attended the meeting. The T-shirt is in reference to the board's reluctance to implement all of the reform-related bylaws overwhelmingly passed at the annual meeting of member-owners in April.

At its May meeting, the board voted to contest three new bylaws — each of them aimed at making the business dealings of the board more transparent — by asking the court to invalidate them.

Bustamante singled out member-owner James Padilla of San Antonio, whom he said made a claim that he wanted to strike the trustees over the head with a 2-by-4 during a meeting of the Co-op Reform Committee earlier this month. Police spoke briefly with Padilla, who denied causing any disruption.

The meeting turned volatile soon after it started.

After roll call, Bustamante noted that a man in the audience, James Cherry, of Magdalena, had set up a tripod and was prepared to film the meeting. Bustamante said recording devices were not permitted.

District 5 trustee Charlie Wagner, who has led the movement for reform in opposition to his fellow trustees, protested, saying that member-owners had passed a bylaw that the board abide by the Open Meetings Act, which allows for recording devices.

Wagner soon got into a dispute with co-op attorney Dennis Francish, who has advised the board that attempting to apply the act to a nonprofit electric utility was unreasonable, unworkable and unlawful.

Wagner insisted the bylaw was already in effect and the board needed to follow it.

Wagner then accused Francish of failing to work for the interests of the member-owners, who passed the new bylaws by such a decisive margin. "This guy has got to go!" Wagner said, referring to the attorney.

Others board members chimed in and the audience grew vocal in Wagner's defense. In the midst of the verbal crossfire, Bustamante recognized a motion to go into executive session.

District 3 trustee Prescilla Mauldin, one of three new trustees voted in last October as the reform movement gained steam, said the board needed a reason to go into closed session.

No reason was given, and when member-owners were asked to leave nearly everyone stayed seated.

Bustamante then directed co-op general manager Polo Pineda to call police. Moments later, Bustamante called for a motion to cancel the meeting altogether, and amid shouting, his request was granted.

District 3 trustee Donald Wolberg was jeered by some audience members as he prepared to leave, and called a "fraud" and "turncoat." Wolberg was elected as a reform candidate last October but voted along with the majority of the board to challenge the three new bylaws member-owners passed in April.

On his way out, Wolberg muttered, "Bunch of idiots."

When police arrived, Wagner explained what the dispute was all about and handed officer Gilbert Gallegos a copy of the Open Meetings Act compliance guide distributed by the New Mexico Attorney General's Office. He told the officer that if anyone needed to be arrested, he volunteered to be the one.

"Take all of us," someone in the crowd offered.

Gallegos spoke to attorney Francish via cell phone. After he got off the phone, he asked everyone to leave, as they would be trespassing on private property if they stayed.

One woman put up a mild protest. "But this is our co-op," she said.

Gallegos then made the point that since the meeting was canceled there was no longer a reason for them to be there. He added that law enforcement's resources could be better utilized elsewhere, and people eventually complied.

While the board has voted to challenge the validity of the three bylaws in court, Wagner and member-owners have threatened that lawsuits could be coming from their side.