

Trustees vote to oust electric co-op's leaders

By Staci Matlock

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Three trustees of the Mora-San Miguel Electric Cooperative board, which serves a portion of Santa Fe County, voted to fire the utility's manager and to remove the board president.

Board chairman Diego Quintana and Mora-San Miguel Electric Cooperative manager Alex C. Romero called the actions on Thursday illegal and "a hostile takeover."

The utility serves close to 11,000 customers spread across three counties, including about 1,000 in eastern Santa Fe County. It is one of 16 rural electric cooperatives in New Mexico, which provides power to small communities around the state. Rural electric cooperatives are owned by their member customers.

Quintana and trustee James Ortiz say their fellow board members Robert M. Quintana, Dan Romero and Virginia Mondragon voted to remove Alex Romero from his position as chief executive officer and general manager. The board's attorney Nancy R. Long wasn't at the meeting, according to the trustees. Romero earned \$120,000 a year, according to his employment contract.

Robert Quintana said he needed to consult with Long before responding to questions. Dan Romero and Mondragon did not respond to messages requesting comment.

Diego Quintana (no relation to Robert Quintana) and Ortiz voted against firing the manager. They said a vote to remove the manager wasn't on the agenda and would have required a two-thirds vote, or four trustees, under the by-laws to be valid.

"Diego and I think he's done a helluva a good job," Ortiz said. "We made TIER. He's trying to save money. They don't seem to agree."

The Timed Income Expense Ratio is a financial rating given to electric cooperatives by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Utility Services, which makes loans to rural cooperatives.

Diego Quintana from Pecos and Ortiz of Villanueva said the other trustees ignored them and told Alex Romero he had to leave immediately.

"They told me they were firing me for cause but didn't tell me the cause," Romero said.

Under his contract, Romero is supposed to be given 15 days written notice if he is going to be terminated with cause and 30 days to appeal his firing. The board is supposed to provide the reason he is being fired. If he is terminated with no cause, the board would have to pay him at least \$30,000 under the contract.

Romero, an electrical engineer, was chief operating officer of Kit Carson Electric Cooperative before

joining Mora-San Miguel Electric in 2011. He was recruited to the position by Robert Quintana, who was then president of the cooperative's board of trustees.

Ortiz said one of the board members who voted to oust Romero as manager told him Romero had to leave the electric cooperative vehicle he is authorized to use and find his own way to get home, even though he didn't have another vehicle at the office.

After the board fired Romero, they tried to remove Diego Quintana as president. Quintana and Ortiz said they couldn't do that without a two-thirds vote according to the by-laws.

"It got pretty nasty. It was like a screaming match," Ortiz said. "It was like a complete power shift."

Quintana and Ortiz left the meeting.

Ortiz, Diego Quintana and Alex Romero said they think there are two main issues driving dissension.

Ortiz said the other three trustees didn't like a suggestion by he and Quintana to send fewer board members to conferences and save the cooperative thousands of dollars in reimbursements for travel and hotel rooms. He said, for example, the upcoming state meeting will be held at Buffalo Thunder in Pojoaque. He said trustees could drive home each day instead of renting hotel rooms for three nights and charging it to the cooperative.

In addition, trustee Dan Romero wants to run for re-election to a third term in June. Long, the cooperative's attorney, sent the board a memo in March saying the current by-laws limit trustees to two consecutive terms. They must wait three years before running again. Romero represents District 4, which includes Rowe, part of East Pecos, San Jose, Tecolote, Romeroville and other villages.

Long's opinion is opposite one given to the board a year ago by another attorney, Lorna M. Wiggins, who said Romero could run for a third consecutive term. Long told the trustees that Wiggins' opinion was incomplete and includes language in the rural cooperative's by-laws "that simply is not there."

Ortiz said he's hoping for a peaceful resolution to the problems, which distract from the cooperative's business.

"I would like for hopefully an injunction to be put in place and stop this nonsense that's going on," Ortiz said. "These guys can't just fire the manager because they don't like him or for no reason."

The trustees called an emergency meeting at 4:30 p.m. Monday in Mora to select an interim manager. Diego Quintana and Ortiz said they wouldn't attend because they still believe the vote to remove the manager was illegal.

Audits in 2010 and 2011 found several problems with how the cooperative was managing its financial accounting. Most of those were being addressed by the end of 2011. But an audit for 2012 is not yet on the cooperative's website. In addition, minutes of meetings held in January and February are not yet on the cooperative's website.

Mora-San Miguel also has been sued recently by a Pecos Canyon property owner who claims the

cooperative is responsible for a downed power line that sparked the Tres Lagunas fire in 2013.

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Disclosure: Matlock is a member of the Mora-San Miguel Electric Cooperative.