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Solutions for Change employee quits over 'inappropriate' request

By Phil Diehl

A former employee of the Vista-based nonprofit Solutions for Change said this week she felt compelled to quit her job because of the way she was treated by her boss after she declined to embrace the organization's support for a controversial Oceanside development.

Solutions bused in about 50 employees, clients and graduates of its program to a Nov. 6 Oceanside City Council meeting to advocate for the 585-home North River Farms project proposed by Integral Communities. The council approved the project on a 3-2 vote, despite opposition from a majority of residents and previous recommendations for denial from the city's Planning Commission and staffers.

Employees of the nonprofit, which helps homeless families get back on their feet, were informed on the day of the council meeting that they would send a group to support the project for Integral, one of their financial donors, said Cynthia Schopen, an Escondido resident who had started her job at Solutions in January.

"We got an email to the staff to drop everything for the rest of the day," Schopen said. "I was nervous about it, because I had a lot to do."

Solutions Executive Director Chris Megison made it clear at the staff meeting that employees would be going to Oceanside City Hall “to court a donor who gives us a lot of money” and that anyone who didn’t want to go could “look for another job,” Schopen said.

Megison said Tuesday that no one was threatened, but he declined to discuss the specifics of Schopen’s case.

“We do not force (anyone) to go to these meetings,” Megison said. He said the idea to support North River Farms came from graduates of the Solutions program.

The Solutions group was provided with bus transportation, pizza, and green “Yes on NRF” T-shirts and signs by the developer. They arrived well before the council meeting and took many of the seats in the front and center rows, which forced opponents to sit outside the crowded room.

The tactic angered many residents and added to the hard feelings in the council chambers.

Schopen did not attend, but a Solutions employee who was there, Jennifer Pankey, said Tuesday she knew little about North County Farms, but she went because she wanted to see how the local government process works, and the Solutions program encourages civic engagement.

“I have never experienced anything so crazy and hateful as that meeting in my entire life,” Pankey said. “I guess I stepped into a hornets’ nest.”

Solutions for Change has 47 employees in programs spread across locations in seven North County cities that help about 600

people daily.

Schopen took a job as a full-time case manager in January after moving to Escondido from San Bernardino County with her military husband. She has a bachelor's degree in social work and is completing a master's degree.

Employees at the Solutions staff meeting were divided into three groups, she said. Two groups were given written instructions and bused to Oceanside City Hall. The third group stayed behind to provide child care for those who went on the buses.

When the staff meeting broke up, Megison asked Schopen to come into his office, she said. He told her he did not like her body language, facial expressions and attitude in the meeting, and that she should take the rest of the week off.

"I started crying," she said. "He didn't fire me, but I was upset ... that was incredibly inappropriate on so many levels."

She submitted her resignation a few days later, she said.

Megison said the group's participation in the City Council meeting was cleared by Solutions' attorney.

"This is a company (Integral) that has supported us for 10 years," he said. "It's directly benefiting our residents. We help a ton of people from Oceanside."

Two independent attorneys who were asked about the Solutions activities both said the effort appeared to be inappropriate.

"There is certainly something unethical about that," said Everett DeLano, an Escondido attorney who often represents nonprofit

environmental groups.

State law requires open meetings to encourage public participation, he said Tuesday. However, an effort to pack the chambers with people to distort the view or prevent others from speaking “doesn’t sound right to me at all.”

Jeff Tenenbaum, senior counsel at a Washington, D.C., firm that represents nonprofits, said Tuesday that it’s not illegal for a nonprofit to require employees to support its mission. For example, he said, Solutions could require its employees to lobby for a low-income housing project that would help house the organization’s residents.

However, there’s no low-income housing included in North River Farms.

Also, it is wrong to enlist employees to support something that benefits a private entity, such as the developer, more than it benefits the public, he said. The North River Farms homes will be sold at market rates and are unlikely to be available to anyone facing homelessness.

“I have some real private-benefit concerns,” Tenenbaum said. “This is a problem for sure, on its face.”

The 215-acre North River Farms site is on North River Road, between Stallion Drive and Wilshire Road, on the southwestern corner of the Morro Hills region that has been farmed for tomatoes, cut flowers and citrus for generations.

Designed with an agricultural theme, the project will include neighborhood gardens available to residents, a farmers market, different types of housing in separate “villages,” and a

commercial core with a restaurant, brewery or both, and space for offices, retail shops and community activities.

Opponents of the project have called the development urban sprawl at its worst. Supporters say it would bring much-needed homes and improvements to nearby streets, sewer and water systems and public safety.

Integral has built more than 30 master-planned communities in California, including Palomar Station, a 370-unit apartment complex near Palomar College in San Marcos, and projects in Oceanside, Vista, Escondido and San Diego.

“As housing advocates, we’re proud of our relationship with Solutions for Change,” Integral project manager Ninia Hammond said last week. “They are a transformative organization that has been dedicated to changing lives and ending homelessness in North County for 20 years.”

Megison and Hammond both declined to say how much Integral donates to Solutions.

The developer also supports the Boys and Girls Club of Oceanside, the YMCA, the Oceanside Chamber of Commerce, the Oceanside Charitable Foundation and other nonprofits.