

Turner resigns

By GREG GILES NEWS EDITOR VENICE GONDOLIER

In an emotional four-and-a-half-hour meeting Tuesday evening Venice City Council voted to accept the resignation of City Manager Isaac Turner. The vote was 4-3 with the members elected in November voting in favor. Mayor John Holic was the deciding vote, along with Bob Daniels, who forced the issue, Jeanette Gates and Emilio Carlesimo. Voting against were Kit McKeon, John Moore and Jim Bennett.

It appeared Turner could have stayed, but he decided his own fate.

Holic voted against accepting the resignation during a preliminary vote, saying the way the issue came up showed the worst in Venice.

But after hours of questioning his effectiveness and ability to lead, Turner asked for a break in the proceedings just before the final vote and asked the mayor to reconsider his vote.

"This is probably the hardest thing I've ever had to do," said a tearful Turner. "I won for a few moments. I have a heart for Venice. I could possibly survive, but if it's best for the community and I can't get you all to work with me, then you have your wish. I hope you appreciate what's being given to you."

"Our discussion was about whether Mr. Turner would be able to work with council," Holic told the audience. "My comment was it is a hostile council and he wouldn't."

Daniels, who said his wife and Turner's wife are best friends in Willow Chase, cited a litany of complaints, including use of the city credit card for meals, the handling of the forced resignation of the former police chief, failure to conduct required staff evaluations, and the lack of progress on numerous projects.

"There seems to be a track record from McKinney (Texas) to Ormond Beach (where Turner previously served as city manager) of 15 years of resignations and it seems that is what we are dealing with here today," Daniels said. "This is about leadership. Always has been."

"I see a man who is not a leader," Gates said. "I've found him to be sloppy and disorganized. She chastised Turner for forgetting meetings, saying "(it's) not only a waste of time, but disrespectful of all those involved."

Carlesimo pointed to a failed vote by city employees to ratify a tentative contract as an example of failure on Turner's part, showing poor employee morale and dissatisfaction with the city's top administrator.

City Attorney Bob Anderson was asked to reveal his findings regarding allegations made last week by Daniels that Turner misused the city's purchasing card by paying for meals with it.

Anderson concluded Turner improperly purchased meals for himself and others using the purchasing cards, was improperly reimbursed for the meals, used bad judgment in having the city pay for the meals, and that the finance department failed to properly oversee the "P-card" program. He also said the finance director incorrectly interpreted the policy, city code and state statutes.

He recommended Turner reimburse the city, that the department improve its oversight, and allow the city attorney to determine what is an allowable reimbursement under the city's policy. But he didn't find Turner had committed malfeasance or misfeasance, which could have been grounds for termination without a severance package.

Holic questioned other expenses, like the payment of a consultant's per diem expenses while Turner also appeared to have paid for his meals at a local restaurant. "This kind of thing just really eats at me," Holic said.

Holic said he was dismayed at how the issue of Turner's resignation was brought up by Daniels, who visited privately with former council members and Turner two weeks ago with a draft severance package.

"I have to ask myself, is this the way we treat people?" Holic said. "My campaign motto was 'Putting the heart back in Venice.' What I am witnessing is the continuing ripping out of the heart of Venice. What we are doing is the worst of Venice. We don't need to do that. We have ways to solve this."

McKeon called it a witch hunt.

"At best this was handled in an absolutely horrible fashion. I believe termination is inappropriate without corrective action," he said.

Moore previously gave Turner positive evaluations and supported his continued employment with the city.

"I agree this was poorly handled," he said. "Is he the best city manager we could possibly have? I've worked under four city managers in eight years. He's not the best but certainly not the worst. I support the city manager."

Bennett, who still practices law, called for a better policy for employee reviews, possibly even a separate body to conduct employee evaluations.

"This is a witch hunt, and I don't like it. The accusations are of such little merit as to (invite) a lawsuit," Bennett said, with Turner's attorney Nevin Weiner sitting yards away.

Council voted to accept Turner's resignation effective immediately with a severance package equal to nine months' pay with continued family health insurance coverage. They also waived a penalty clause that would have allowed the city to recoup 50 percent of Turner's original moving expenses from Ormond Beach.

Turner thanked staff and supporters in the audience who spoke on his behalf during the public comment period, saying it was a privilege to serve the city.

"I'm not giving up. Not getting out," Turner said. "But this is the system and the way it works. I could survive and try to wait people out. It's just not my choice.

"I'm tired. This is wearing on me. Don't mistake the emotion and the tears for lack of determination and strength. I am determined to be successful. And I believe I will be successful."