

SANTA FE RIVER COMMISSION; RIVER GROUP SHAKE-UP

Mayor denies that clashing policy opinion was motive behind removals

By Julie Ann Grimm

The New Mexican

A former member of the Santa Fe River Commission says he suspects Mayor David Coss took him off the advisory board because of disagreements over policy recommendations. The mayor denies that but says he changed the group's makeup to reflect his current priorities regarding the mostly dry channel through the heart of Santa Fe.

Peter Stacey was one of two members of the nine-member board whose terms weren't renewed by Coss during a City Council meeting last month.

Stacey, a research professor in The University of New Mexico's Department of Biology who specializes in river restoration, told The New Mexican that he suspects both he and attorney Matthew McQueen were removed because they fought strongly for the protection of beavers near the Santa Fe Municipal Airport.

"Apparently, this approach was unacceptable," Stacey said in an interview this week.

Coss said that he did not retain Stacey -- whose position on the board was as an alternate member -- and McQueen because he wanted to bring in new members on the board that advises city hall on issues related to the river.

"I've wanted to involve the business community and the downtown community in the commission and focus some of our efforts upon the river corridor in the downtown, which I think is the most difficult reach to work on and the one of the most significance to the city," the mayor said.

New commissioners are Sam Gerberding, general manager for the Inn of the Governors and Del Charro Restaurant, and Patricio Serna, state Supreme Court justice. Their workplaces face one another on opposite sides of the river at Don Gaspar Avenue.

James Cutropia, an administrator at the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, was named an alternate. Member Dana Vackar Strang, education director at the Audubon Center, resigned in early September following the birth of a child, she said. According to the authorizing resolution, the alternate member may only vote in the absence of a member.

McQueen said this week that he hoped to speak to the mayor personally about the matter but had not had that chance yet.

"I enjoyed being on the River Commission," he said. "I felt I had a lot to offer and I didn't really feel like I was done contributing. ... I think the River Commission is a body to discuss and advocate for the river, and I think they are doing that. I would certainly like to see them do that more. And maybe with some people with some business and political connections that I don't have on the commission, maybe it will be more effective."

Stacey said that, while he recognized the mayor's authority over the commission's makeup, he is concerned that Coss was sending a message that members should stifle their opinions.

Conflict has brewed the last few months between the advisory board and city airport manager Jim Montman over recommendations in the river management plan to protect beavers in wetlands located below the city sewage-treatment plant and near the runways. The advisory board wants the beavers protected unless there is proof that they pose a risk to airplanes.

Montman said a few weeks ago he asked the board to delay an opinion on the issue until the airport completes a "wildlife hazard assessment" under way. His concern, he said, is that beaver dams will increase the size of the wetlands and attract birds that pose a danger to aircraft using the runways.

"The beaver issue has been very controversial and we were given the message that we weren't supposed to say anything about it," Stacey said, adding later that city departments are often odds with one another when it comes to river policies.

Minutes from the commission's October meeting indicate the mayor may have had another motivation for deciding not to renew their terms, which had expired in February. Both McQueen and Stacey told city staff members during the Oct. 18 meeting that the commission was being excluded from the drafting of an ordinance intended to require the city to release reservoir water into the river perpetually.

Coss has been working on the proposed legislation, which he says would give weight to a series of resolutions by the city governing body that have called for the release of water in the past.

Gerald Z. Jacobi, commission chairman and a professor of environmental science at New Mexico Highlands University, verified that the message he got from Coss was that the mayor wanted to put more energy into the river's downtown stretch.

Jacobi said he's proud of the work the group has done and that he's never felt pressured by anyone at the city to advocate for a certain position or to oppose it.

"Does the city listen to us? Yes. ... We've done very well. The city has their way of doing things and they don't always move as fast as we'd like them to, but a lot of things have happened," Jacobi said.

He noted the development of riverside trails and two summers during which water from Santa Fe Canyon reservoirs was allowed to flow through the city for longer periods thanks to the "Living River" efforts.

Although a river task force existed earlier, the River Commission was created as a standing committee when the city adopted a river corridor master plan in 1996 that called for a board to review and make recommendations to the governing body on matters related the river and its watershed.

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