

SPCA revolution

Board members who ousted Paterniti get the boot

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SANTA CRUZ — SPCA directors who intended to oust the shelter's executive director were kicked off the board themselves Wednesday and asked to turn in their keys.

In a series of well-orchestrated maneuvers, supporters of executive director Jody Paterniti managed to gain control of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' board of directors.

They managed to break a months-old 4-4

deadlock by voting to remove board president Terry Riley, who was precluded from voting on the motion.

Next, having gained a 4-3 majority, they voted to remove two more anti-Paterniti members and to accept the resignation of a third.

Then, to the delight of cheering SPCA employees, they replaced the four ousted members with Paterniti supporters.

The upshot is:

- Paterniti's contract as executive director will be renewed. The victorious faction

voted unanimously to conduct negotiations with Paterniti on the terms.

- A grievance filed by seven SPCA managers, all women employees who said the board discriminated against them based on gender, sexual orientation and size, is no longer an issue. The board members named in the grievance have been removed.

- Yet another victory for the animal rights philosophy which has been increasingly embraced under Paterniti's reign.

"I wish it had never happened at all,"

said a jubilant Paterniti after the hours-long power struggle. "But I'm very, very pleased to be here and able to continue in the job."

"This is a triumph of good over evil," said Thomas Graves, who last month was denied a seat but, after the upset Wednesday, was elected to the board.

Deposed board president Riley was less thrilled.

"I just think that what happened is that any diversity of opinion was snuffed out,

Please see SPCA — BACK PAGE

SPCA turnabout

Continued from Page A1

and that's the real damage that was done. There are not people left to challenge, in a healthy way, things that are being done."

Paterniti's supporters liked the SPCA's advocacy work and its animal rights stances.

Her critics were more interested in animal control and animal welfare.

Paterniti had earlier been notified that her three-year, \$52,000-a-year contract would not be renewed. She was scheduled to leave April 1.

She said she had been given no reasons for her dismissal but suspected that her management style, which emphasizes self-directed work teams and empowering of employees, was the reason.

Board members who voted to let her go offered no reason, saying they were bound by confidentiality.

Employees said they suspected Paterniti was forced out because she hired gays and lesbians and refused to stop.

"She herself is the mother of two gay sons and is therefore very committed to a nondiscriminatory workplace. I believe it is her stance on this issue that has prompted the attempted ouster," said Kat Salisbury, an SPCA manager, in a grievance filed last week with the state Department of Industrial Relations.

To break the standing 4-4 deadlock, the board had hired professional mediators and was undergoing conflict resolution.

Partly because of the rancor, several board members had already resigned.

Attempts last month to bring the board back to its 17-member capacity had failed. The board could agree on only two of nine applicants to elect to board positions.

As a result of Wednesday's dramatic turnaround, even that election didn't stick.

Charging that she had been duped and that the past election was therefore a fraud, board member and Paterniti supporter Pam Dunbar successfully led a move to vote again on the candidates.

That was the first fight out of the box — one that could change the balance of votes on Paterniti.

"They deliberately misled us, and we were trusting enough to believe what we were told," Dunbar said of the election process that Riley proposed.

"We cannot do this," protested Riley, questioning the legality of undoing the election. "We cannot do this."

Despite Riley's protests, another vote was taken and the previous election overturned.

Ken Haber, who sat quietly at the table, was voted off the board before he ever was in. He left the meeting without comment.

Other developments were just as stunning. Among them:

- The pro-Paterniti board members revealed they had hired an attorney to represent them, Paterniti and Graves, who was seeking a seat on the board. Throughout the meeting, that lawyer, Derek Allison, consulted with Paterniti and her supporters, suggesting motions.

The SPCA board attorney was not present.

Riley said later he was "flabbergasted" by the hiring of Allison. "Bing, bing, bing. It was that well orchestrated," he said. "I guess that's what happens when you get lay people like us dealing with attorneys. We were outgunned."

- Paterniti released a statement that if fired, she intended to sue the four board members who opposed her for wrongful termination.

She also warned that the board members supporting her could block the opposition from using insurance money to hire attorneys to defend themselves. Board members would have to pay out of their own pockets for attorneys to defend themselves.

- Paterniti supporters on the board said that if the 4-4 gridlock could not be broken, they were prepared to go to court and have a judge appoint another board member.

Employees packed the meeting room and cheered loudly for Paterniti. Earlier, 32 of 34 employees had signed a letter supporting Paterniti.

Scotts Valley Mayor Michael Shulman and City Council member Joe Miller were also in the crowd.

Miller said Scotts Valley officials, who contract with the shelter for animal control, were very happy with the changes Paterniti had made since 1991 and skeptical of what might occur in her absence.

Ousted members were Riley, Mary Ann Mathews, Sandra Parady and Mike Mount.

Elected to the board were beer distributor and shelter donor George Couch, Graves and Diane Koletzke, all of whom were denied membership earlier, and Debbie Obara, a former board member who had resigned.

David Gray, elected last month, was re-elected Wednesday. Also elected was Joan De Neffe, a Paterniti supporter who came to the meeting with motions, ballot statements and letters of resignation.

"I didn't expect to pull it off," De Neffe said. "I came prepared for all contingencies. We were just very lucky it went in our direction."

Sam Burkhardt was named president of the board.

Dunbar, in seeking to remove Riley from the board, said he had not represented the board and had wasted time and money on non-issues.

"All of that effort should have been on the animals we have," she said.

"I don't think we are going to meet anywhere in the middle," said Dunbar before the purge.

Mount objected that rules were changed to accomplish the takeover. He resigned before being kicked off.

"You guys have made it clear you want a very narrow view of this organization and what you want it to represent," said Mount.

He told Paterniti that board members had tried to talk to her about the problems. "You didn't really want to talk about it," he said.

"Please leave your shelter key on the table when you leave," said Paterniti.

When Parady, the board secretary, was voted out, she was asked to leave notes from the meeting.

"Get your own paper," she replied.

Riley said after the meeting he was "absolutely astonished" by the turn of events.

"Last night I sat in a conflict resolution meeting with most of those people for nearly four hours," he said. "I thought we were making progress. Boy, was I surprised."

The employees who had filed grievances alleging discrimination loudly cheered at the outcome of the meeting.

The women, some of whom are lesbians, said they had been told

the ousted board members were homophobic and intended to "clean house."

"I have seen documents and heard stories of homophobia and size-ism," said Salisbury.

"As a lesbian, I am now in fear of my job and for the jobs of my coworkers who are gay and lesbian," Salisbury wrote in her grievance.

Riley hotly denied that gender or sexual orientation had anything to do with the problems and said the issue had been used to divert attention from other issues.

"I'm shocked and alarmed at those things being said. They're absolutely and categorically not true," he said.

Riley said that even without the coup, Paterniti might have kept her job for a while. "I feel as though what would have happened is that we would have extended her contract some more to get her to participate in conflict resolution."

He maintained Paterniti was fired. The board decided to split her job in two, and have an executive director of operations and a fundraiser.

"As a nonprofit, we live and die raising money," he said. "The forecasts we had done indicated we were not gaining and perhaps were going backward and we wanted to raise fundraising to a higher level."

Paterniti was offered, but declined, the fundraising position, he said.

Riley said he would not challenge the outcome of Wednesday's meeting.

"I don't think it serves any purpose except to make more bad blood," he said. "I don't think they need more bad blood, but I think they need new blood."