

City Council offers to mediate strike

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Watsonville City Council members said last night they've finally had enough of the bitter strike that has polarized the community and threatened the safety of its citizens.

After weeks of avoiding involvement, the council unanimously agreed last night to act as a catalyst for future discussion between the Teamsters Union and two food-processing plants.

"Events of the past few days indicate that this situation has accelerated beyond a labor dispute to a point where it could now have as devastating an impact on our city as a major flood or earthquake," Councilman Rex Clark said in a prepared statement.

The rest of the council agreed with Clark, saying they have had enough of the violence and

destruction that occurred this past week at Watsonville Canning and Frozen Food Co. and Richard A. Shaw Inc.

The confrontations were the byproduct of the 39-day-old strike by union workers at both plants and a current impasse in negotiations with plant owners.

That impasse has also lasted long enough, the council said, and it is time for both sides to begin talking again.

Council members decided last night that they will ask union and plant representatives to get together with city officials to discuss plans for new talks aimed at settling the bitter labor dispute. And if asking doesn't work, Councilman Clark has proposed the city subpoena the feuding parties.

Clark said, "In my opinion, we have reached a critical hour in our city's future, and the time has come for us, the elected representatives for all

the people, to take decisive action in order to avert further violence."

The worst violence of the strike occurred last weekend when several fires scorched both plants, and one firm adjacent to Watsonville Canning was destroyed by a fire early Monday morning. Rock throwing, arrests and confrontations with police by striking Teamsters have been on the upswing in recent weeks as emotions have continued to rise on the picket lines.

"It's obvious that it's truly getting out of hand," Clark said after reading the statement. The council, after accepting Clark's initiative unanimously, decided to direct Mayor Ann Soldo and City Manager John Radin to request a meeting at City Hall with union and plant officials.

But the bitterness of the long strike may make that difficult to accomplish.

"Too bad if the city wants to bring us together. We're not going," said Steve Shaw, vice president of Richard A. Shaw. "I know the city has a concern, but it is no greater than our concern to get the strike settled."

Shaw said that the city would best serve the strike by staying out of the negotiations. The more people involved with the talks, he said, the more complicated things become.

Taking the opposite view, Teamsters' secretary-treasurer Richard King said this morning he is very willing to meet with both sides and the city.

"It won't do any harm," King said. "The idea of the city getting involved is a little unorthodox, but I'll certainly come to a meeting. I'll listen to anybody who has an idea how to resolve this strike."

Smiley Verduzco, president of Watsonville Canning, sat quietly as Clark read his statement last night. Verduzco was at the council meeting to address a sewage-plant funding issue, but did not comment on Clark's proposal.

He was not available this morning to discuss the proposed meeting, but city officials are hopeful he will cooperate.

"We're just offering them a platform for them to get together," Mayor Ann Soldo said last night. "This thing (strike) is costing us (the city) a lot of money and our responsibility is to protect our people."

Councilman Roy Ingersoll agreed.

"It's not just costing us, it's costing the whole community," he said. Ingersoll and Clark said banks and stores in the downtown area are feeling the crunch of the strike now that 1,700 workers are without paychecks.

Until now, the council has avoided any involvement in the strike.

"I have felt strongly that the City Council, as a group and as individuals, should avoid becoming involved in what has been essentially a labor dispute," Clark said in his statement.

The fear had been that the council would be perceived as taking sides, Mayor Soldo said.

"We're definitely not going to take sides in this," she said. But a meeting that could spark settlement negotiations can only help, she said.

The meeting, if it is arranged, will be open to the public.

"We can't have a closed meeting because then we would be acting as negotiators," Soldo said.

As for the city's power of subpoena in the event that their invitation is rejected, there are still some questions. City Attorney Don Haile is out of town today and was not available to explain what the city could do to force a meeting.

But City Manager Radin questioned whether the city could actually do that.

"I don't think we have any legal powers to force anybody to negotiate," he said. "In all my years here we've never used anything like that before."

If the meeting takes place, it will be with the full council or with a designated council committee, Radin said. No date has been set for the meeting.

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