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FEATURED

Group seeks to oust Rosenthal

By RICHARD TAMBORRINO Special to The Citizen
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Just when it looked like the Islamorada Village Council might be getting on track with the installation of Interim City Manager Bryan Cook, who said last week he plans to steady a group that has demonstrated harsh disagreements and has strayed from agenda topics of late, a movement is now underway to remove Councilman Henry Rosenthal through a recall petition drive.

The petition drive accuses Rosenthal of malfeasance, which happens when an elected official knowingly ignores the law to benefit himself instead of voter or community interests.

The grounds for recall, as outlined in the petition, say Rosenthal interfered with the performance of the village planning director in June by instructing her to unlawfully poll other council members in advance to see if they would support his proposed amendment to village code.



Rosenthal

They claim Rosenthal, a former entertainer, was using his position to pave the way for a potential conversion of Island Community Church, which Rosenthal was interested in purchasing, into an entertainment venue.

On Aug. 16, a group called Islamorada Forever Inc., which is leading the recall effort, registered with the village as a political committee, with Casey Watkins, who lost to Rosenthal in his bid last November for a council seat, listed as the committee chairman. Also listed as officers are Megan Scallan, who has the same address as Watkins, and Joseph Campbell of Asheville, North Carolina.

Watkins said this action has nothing to do with the November vote or his desire to get on the council. He said he “wants to keep the community wonderful” and there have been “a couple of events since June where Rosenthal hasn’t stayed within the boundaries” of council member protocol. He pointed to more than one meeting where Rosenthal posed questions directly to village staff, which is against village procedure. Watkins believes the allegations against Rosenthal are strong, which is why he decided to chair the committee.

“We’re aiming for 600 signatures, have a good idea how many have been distributed and hope to get the right number back,” he said.

Former councilwoman Deb Gillis filed a separate state ethics complaint in early July against Rosenthal, accusing him of “directing staff to call other council members on his behalf.” She said she supports the recall group’s cause “because if this town wants him, they’ll decide.”

Rosenthal was reached by phone on Aug. 30 and was reserved in his comments about this effort, saying the situation was “somewhat complicated.” He did offer one succinct statement, saying, “One never knows what motivates people to do what they do. Ultimately, the truth will prevail.”

Rosenthal confirmed he has legal representation. When asked if he felt this action by a former council candidate was retaliatory or personal in nature, all he would offer was, “I have nothing to say about my relationship (with Watkins).”

Rosenthal added that he doesn't believe this latest development will have any impact on how the Village Council operates.

Cook confirmed via email last week that the village has "heard the rumblings" about the recall effort, adding, "The village has not received any sort of official petition or notice. Meanwhile, there is really no action for us to take."

This is the second petition drive challenging a government entity or a specific council member to emerge in the last month. Key Colony Beach residents filed a petition to seek an injunction to halt the city commission's vote to rebuild City Hall in early August. What's different about this drive, according to Monroe County Supervisor of Elections Joyce Griffin, is that a recall petition is covered by Florida statutes, while the KCB petition challenges the city's charter.

Griffin explained her office's role in this process. The recall petition group must secure signed petitions from 10% of the Islamorada voting population, regardless of whether they voted in last November's election. At the last Islamorada election, there were 5,319 voters, which would amount to roughly 532 signatures. The signed petitions must be submitted to the village within 30 days of the date the committee registered. Islamorada Village Clerk Marne McGrath would then turn the petitions into the elections office, which will verify that the signees are registered voters, live in Islamorada and their signatures match what's on file.

Assuming the committee achieves that leg of the process, Rosenthal would then be required to submit a 200 word or less defense for a "second petition and defense." At that point, the recall committee has an additional 60 days to secure 15% of the voters — roughly 800 — to sign the second petition. If the required signatures are secured, a special recall election could be scheduled within 30 to 60 days, and voters would be asked through a majority vote whether to retain or dismiss Rosenthal.

According to Griffin, there was a mandatory manual recount for Village Council Seat 4 in last November's election, with a five-vote difference between Gillis and Rosenthal. Watkins finished in last place in that election, garnering 306 votes to Rosenthal's 1,145. Both Watkins and Gillis dismissed the November vote as having any bearing on their respective actions.

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