

Infighting surfaces on Franklin council

Home News Tribune Online 01/9/07

By **DAVID STEGON**
STAFF WRITER
dstegon@thnt.com

FRANKLIN — A sizeable rift exists between the Democratic members of the Township Council as the three members, who were part of a reform movement which took over the party last June, and the five members who were loyal to former party boss Bill Grippo are at odds in what many have said goes beyond standard political banter.

Tensions boiled over during last week's reorganization meeting when each side accused the other of putting personal feelings above the best interests of the town when making recommendations for committee seats.

"To be honest, I was embarrassed," said Deputy Mayor Ellen Ritchie, who is the target of a recall effort to oust her from office. "There were a few times I wanted to climb underneath the desk and hide my face."

The reorganization meeting, which is currently airing on FTTV Channel 25, is an annual session held to make appointments to municipal committees and posts for the upcoming year. Throughout the meeting, the two sides exchanged personal barbs as the votes in contested appointments followed a common voting pattern.

Ritchie and Teresa Danile, Shirly Eberle, Willie Sumpter and Fred McKenzie usually voted in one block, while Jim Vassanella, Brian Regan and Rajiv Prasad voted in another with Mayor Brian Levine, the lone Republican on the council who is outside the fray.

While the reform movement currently heads the party, the majority of the council is still held by those from the old regime.

Ritchie said she has reached out to the members of the reform group to find common ground, without success. Members of the reform movement say they've reached out to Ritchie, Danile, Sumpter, Eberle and McKenzie — who have been nicknamed "The Unholy Five" by their opposition — also without success.

"It's always been my hope that the members of council will work together," said Roz Sherman, who was elected the Democratic municipal chairwoman in June. "There are going to be personality conflicts that transcend politics, but I hope the worst of it has boiled over and there will be harmony in the future."

One point of contention, though, is the effort to recall Ritchie, who feels the party has not rallied behind her.

Danile said that, while the party chair originally reached out to the group, there has been no contact over the past several weeks. She said she has not felt like she is wanted in the party.

"It's up to the local political chair to include everyone and that's not what has happened," Danile said. "The things they said they wanted to do away with — secret meetings, one person making all the decision, no transparency — they are doing themselves."

Danile said she feels the relationship has been further strained because of what she sees as a lack of support for Ritchie with the recall effort.

Sherman said she is against the recall of Democratic public officials, but said the voters in Ritchie's third ward will decide the deputy mayor's future.

The recall effort, if successful, could have a major impact on the structure of the council as members of the reform party believe Ritchie and Danile instruct the other members of their contingent on how to vote.

Several members of the reform movement pointed to last Tuesday's meeting, contending that Sumpter and Eberle blindly followed the lead of Ritchie and Danile. When casting ballots, Sumpter and Eberle told the clerk they were voting "for whoever they voted for," alluding to Ritchie and Danile during roll call.

McKenzie said he makes his own choices while voting, as do fellow members.

There is no consensus about what affect the council in-fighting will have. Regan, with the reform movement, said it is simply a clash of political opinions and does not affect the council's ability to govern.