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Two Members' Bickering Shakes Up Previously Genteel Newport Council.

The City Council dais in Newport Beach is becoming like a verbal boxing ring, leaving onlookers wondering when the fight might end.

Whether in the council chamber or in email blasts to supporters, recently elected Councilman Scott Peotter and veteran Councilman Keith Curry continue to jab each other during disagreements about city issues.

Previous City Councils in Newport Beach mostly managed to avoid political squabbling that in neighboring cities often marks public discussions sparked by ideological differences.

“Even when we disagreed, we always worked together for the good of the city,” Curry said of previous councils.

But since the election in November of Peotter and three other new council members, arguments between Peotter and Curry often have escalated to personal attacks or name-calling.

A slate of candidates known as “Team Newport” swept the four available seats in the fall council election, the first time in more than a decade that four newcomers had won seats on the City Council.

The slate members — Peotter, Mayor Pro Tem Diane Dixon and Councilmen Kevin Muldoon and Marshall “Duffy” Duffield — promised to rein in what they considered out-of-control spending by city officials.

“The voters spoke and proved they didn’t like the direction of the old council,” Peotter said.

Curry was appointed to the council in 2006 and elected later that year.

He and Peotter squared off most recently during a March council meeting over Peotter’s idea of creating a debt-management fund to try to reduce the city’s pension liabilities and debt from the Civic Center project.

Peotter said the fund would be a way for the city to save money in case the council ever had the opportunity to make an early payoff of the \$106 million worth of Build America bonds that funded the new Civic Center.

The bonds are to be paid off in installments between 2018 and 2040, similar to a home mortgage, according to a report by Fieldman, Rolapp & Associates, an independent financial advisor to the city.

The Build America bonds were used on the project instead of traditional municipal bonds because they presented savings to the city over time. However, the bonds come with a clause in which the city can be penalized about \$27 million if it pays them off early, according to city documents.

Curry blasted Peotter over the issue during the meeting, calling it a “poorly thought-out, politically motivated and half-baked” idea.

He reemphasized his point in an email to his supporters the next day.

“In all my years in and around government, I have never seen anything that compares to the financial illiteracy and the political recklessness on display at City Hall,” he wrote.

Peotter did not respond to Curry during the meeting but sounded off in his own email to supporters.

“I’m not trying to pick a fight,” Peotter said in an interview Wednesday. “The email is a way to set the record straight.”

Peotter likened the situation with Curry to the defense used by Lyle and Erik Menendez, brothers who were convicted in the early 1990s of killing their parents in their Beverly Hills home in an attempt to gain sole access to the family fortune.

During the penalty phase of their trial, the Menendezes asked for mercy because they were orphans.

“They caused the problem and then they blame someone else for the problem,” Peotter wrote in the email.

He went on to state that Curry spent \$143 million on the Civic Center and \$40 million on Marina Park and that “he borrowed \$128 million on behalf of the taxpayers ... to pay for the excesses.”

“Then Curry blames me because I want to discuss possible ways to pay down the debt early ... Menendez award anyone?” he wrote.

Curry said the email “speaks to Peotter’s character and his fitness for public office.”

“I hit him on the issues. I didn’t characterize him as a serial killer,” Curry said.

Peotter acknowledged that he sometimes places the blame for previous council actions squarely on Curry.

“I don’t mean to pin all of that on him, but he’s taking it personally,” Peotter said.

Since the election, Peotter and Curry have locked horns over a variety of issues related to the city’s finances and about reintroducing wood-burning fire rings to Newport’s beaches.

The heated arguments have left some observers wondering whether the two will ever be able to work together.

“At the end of the day, the council had always come together, regardless of disagreements,” Mayor Ed Selich said of previous members. “I’m certainly hopeful that the same thing is going to happen with this council.”

The Daily Pilot

By Hannah Fry

April 1, 2015 | 7:35 p.m.

