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## Alvarado supporters say petty politics at play in recall election

By PATRICK BLAIS

READING - For those rallying to the defense of Select Board member Vanessa Alvarado, the Sept. 1 recall election is more about petty politics than Reading's Town Charter.

Dismissing those who would describe Reading's recall initiative as a noble movement to uphold Reading's Town Charter, former Selectman Ben Tafoya and long-time Town Meeting member Angela Binda both recently ridiculed the suggestion that Alvarado — or any other sole member of an elected board — could single-handedly violate clauses within the government-founding document.

Yet, earlier this spring, former Selectman John Arena and other unidentified recall petition organizers convinced enough Reading voters that Alvarado had potentially done just that by asking Town Manager Robert LeLacheur to explain his rationale for picking Deputy Chief David Clark as his top choice to replace long-time

Police Chief Mark Segalla.

The notion behind the recall initiative, the ardent Alvarado supporters say, is preposterous. And given that Arena lost his seat on the board to Alvarado about two years earlier, the critics say there is more than enough reason to suspect the entire campaign is a poorly disguised attempt at political retribution.

"It's an illogical absurdity," said Tafoya of the idea that Alvarado's actions last February constituted a Town Charter violation. "Here's the fundamental thing: The Town Charter governs town actions. It just isn't possible for a single member to violate it, unless a Select Board member does something like commit fraud by forging a check or something."

"I'm actively campaigning for Vanessa, because I think this is wrong and there are accusations being made that are inaccurate and false," Binda later remarked in a separate phone interview. "Vanessa Alvarado is a single individual. She's not capable of violating the charter. That would

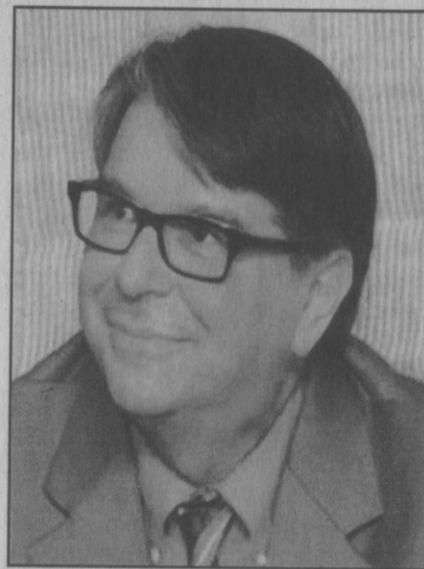
only really occur if there was a vote of the entire Select Board [that was at issue here]."

Scope of review powers

Under Reading's 35-page Town Charter, which functions as a local constitution of sorts, Reading's town manager retains the sole authority to designate job finalists for key public safety posts like the police chief. Meanwhile, the Select Board has a delineated role in the process by confirming or denying that pick.

According to town records, Town Manager Bob LeLacheur, with the assistance of a screening committee, fulfilled his obligations under the charter by spending roughly seven-months in the hunt for Segalla's replacement.

Ultimately, that process ended sometime around the middle or end of January, when the town manager advanced Clark's name as his top choice for the police chief vacancy. Also not in dispute is that the Select Board, charged under the Town Char-



BEN TAFOYA

ter with affirming or rejecting that appointment, unanimously agreed in mid-February with LeLacheur's recommendation.

However, according to former Select Board member John Halsey — who is notably the only certified replacement candidate on the Sept 1 recall ballot — rather than move immediately for a vote on Clark's nomination in early February as he requested, Alvarado in her capacity as chair instead postponed the matter until

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Chronicle.

Future of Reading politics

Alvarado and her supporters insist that when voters head to the polls on Sept. 1 to decide whether to remove the first-term official from office, citizens will ultimately shape the very future of Reading's political environment.

Binda and Tafoya say that disputes over policy differences like the process chosen to vet police chief appointments are already rightfully decided during regular municipal elections, when voters reward or punish sitting own leaders for their decisions by either returning them to office or electing a new person to office.

But instead of waiting the few months to take on Alvarado at the polls, say the recall critics, those behind the push to remove her from office are instead hijacking that process to get rid of a political opponent. Should those recall proponent succeed, detractors warn, few will likely be willing to step forward and risk their personal and professional reputations to volunteer on a town committee or board.

"At the end of the day, voters are going to make their decision, and I have every confidence that people will end up supporting Vanessa. I think the people will see this as a misguided effort by people who are frustrated with an election result," said Tafoya.

Though not taking a position as to whether or not the Town Charter was violated by Alvarado's actions, nine other former elected officials are urging citizens to carefully consider the effects the recall race could have on local politics.

Those joining to ask residents to think carefully about the consequences of their Sept. 1 vote include former School Committee members Jeanne Borawski, Nick Bolvin, and Lisa Gibbs and former Selectmen Barry Berman Marsie West, and Russ Graham.

"The recall election is the nuclear option of local politics; it is enormously disruptive to the business of town governance... Because a recall petition can be issued for any reason, it requires voters to "self-police" the deployment of the recall mechanism to ensure that the grounds for recall are serious enough to justify the inevitable disruption of town government that results from this process," the group wrote recently in an open letter to the community.

"For the first time in memory, Reading voters are now asked to decide whether the stated grounds for recall of an elected official are a good and sufficient basis for removing one particular official. We urge you to consider proportionality as described above in making your own determination. The outcome of this election could establish a new precedent for current and future elected officials - we ask you to also reflect on this before casting your vote," they added.

### Recall

Feb. 11.

The Select Board as a whole then agreed to host a "public listening session", in which citizens would be allowed to provide feedback on Clark's finalist status, before voting on Feb. 19 to affirm the police department veteran's promotion.

Weeks later — following an election that saw Halsey lose his seat after staging a last minute write-in campaign — rumors began swirling around town about the recall petition.

Though the resulting document contained plenty of allegations about the chairwoman "stonewalling" the hiring process and "blocking legitimate police discussions", Alvarado's supporters ask voters to consider whether such rhetoric seems reasonable in light of the approximate two-week delay in reviewing LeLacheur's decision about Clark.

According to Tafoya, not only was the two-week lag between LeLacheur's announcement and the Select Board's vote consistent with the process around Segalla's appointment to chief more than a decade ago, there is in fact nothing in the Town Charter that forbids the elected officials from calling for an extended review.

By contrast, champions of a more conservative reading of the charter, such as local resident William Brown, insist the Select Board can only vote up or down for a candidate for chief.

"The board should go through with whatever process it feels comfortable with to arrive at its decision," said Tafoya, who disputes the idea that the Select Board can't debate the merits of a job finalist or solicit feedback from the public.

"What the charter says is the town manager puts forward a candidate and the board votes to affirm or not affirm. But it doesn't stipulate how the Select Board makes that decision. It doesn't say they can't take some time to think about it," Binda later agreed.

Alvarado defenders also insist that other Select Board members could have at any time objected and called for an immediate decision. Though Halsey did in fact list several objections to the process on Feb. 11 — the former Select Board member's peers agreed to take some additional time to consider LeLacheur's recommendation.

Also protesting the recall efforts, three sitting Select Board members — current Chair Mark Dockser and members Anne Landry and Karen Herrick — have all contested the idea that Alvarado intentionally dragged-out the final hiring decision or otherwise interfered with the process.

"The recall is not about wrongdoing... it is about politics. The nation is politically polarized. For some reason, Reading is toward the high end of nasty political discourse. Folks that do not like the outcome of Vanessa's election 2-plus years ago, are trying to reverse it," Dockser recently stated in a letter submitted to The Reading