



'They went straight psycho.' Ventura apologizes after city employee's texts come to light



The city of Ventura apologized for a string of texts sent by an employee during a May 26 Planning Commission meeting that came to light from public records requests.

The commission was considering the 72-townhome Haley Point project in midtown Ventura when associate planner Jamie Peltier was seen texting. She was communicating with an unnamed relative and city staff, according to the public records.

"I hate the public so much," and "They hate everything and everyone," some of the texts say.

The records request was also sent to Patty Overley, a Ventura resident who spoke out against the project in its current form. She and her husband Glenn Overley were referred to during the worker's communications that night.

In describing the Haley Point project, Peltier wrote, "What a lovely development that the community HATES." Later, she described opponents of the project saying, "They went straight psycho."

Peltier did not respond to email or phone messages seeking comment this week. A call and email to officials with the union that represents her, the Service Employees International Union, Local 721, also went unreturned.

The apology

Ventura spokeswoman Heather Sumagaysay issued an apology to Overley on June 16. Overley had submitted a records request on June 1 for communications related to the May 26 meeting, including the online chat between the city clerk at the meeting and the public.

"It is unfortunate that the employee used a personal mobile device to communicate with a family member during the meeting for communications related to the public's business," Sumagaysay said.

"We deeply regret this happened. This does not reflect the respect for the public to which the city is committed. As we look to transition away from virtual public meetings and welcome back for in-person meetings, the city of Ventura remains committed to the highest level of public services, including respect for the public."

Sumagaysay declined to comment on whether Peltier received any disciplinary action as a result of the texts.

"The city of Ventura takes seriously its responsibility to treat all employees fairly and does not discuss personnel matters," Sumagaysay said.

What's next?

The Haley Point project, which will be considered by the City Council during a July 12 virtual meeting, has divided the community. Some vocal residents are opposed because of density, parking and safety concerns.

The Planning Commission voted 4-0 to approve the development, but it was appealed. The appeal allows the City Council to weigh in and have final say on the project.

Overley and her husband Glenn, who have both spoken out against Haley Point, were mentioned in Peltier's text messages a couple of times. In one text, Peltier wrote, "The overleys have blown up my email." Later, she texted, "He's the worst too" in response to the relative's text about Glenn Overley.

Patty Overley declined to comment for this story.

Peltier was also texting with Planning Manager Dara Sanders and Assistant Community Development Director Neda Zayer.

Patty Overley witnessed Peltier texting and messaged the assistant city clerk, according to the online chat log.

"Jamie texting and smirking is highly inappropriate," Overley wrote. "The community has spent hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars. It is not okay for staff to not act professionally on such an important decision."

Assistant City Clerk Tracy Oehler responded back to Overley, "I will pass your comments to staff."

After the exchange between Oehler and Overley, Zayer texted Peltier "stay off you phone," and then later, "the public is calling you out ... watch your facial expressions too."

When asked if Sanders or Zayer received any disciplinary action, Sumagaysay, repeated that the city does not disclose personnel matters.

Text messages are public records

Most text messages and other written communications by city employees are considered public records.

David Snyder, First Amendment Coalition executive director, said on Tuesday that public officials should realize their messages on email and phone are public records as long as they are related to the "public's business."

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Snyder said the public's business is broadly defined and includes any written messages "regardless of where they reside."

He was glad the city recognized the records had to be collected and disclosed because sometimes municipalities will claim there are no such records.

"It leaves this uncomfortable question on if officials have deleted those messages," Snyder said. "They shouldn't be doing that either. They should be retaining them and providing them for any Public Records Act request."

Generally speaking, Snyder said cities will hold onto messages for about two years.

"I should be clear that that is not set forth explicitly in the California Public Records Act," Snyder said. "There is no specific retention requirement under that law."