

West Covina residents announce recall effort against Councilmember Tony Wu

A group of West Covina residents has begun a recall effort to remove City Councilman Tony Wu from the Fifth District seat, citing alleged misconduct and failed leadership as reasons for his ouster.

Wu, who was first elected in 2015 and is next in line for the mayorship of the city, pushed back on his opponents, saying he's been among leaders trying to reform City Hall for the better.

Before the City Council meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 6, opponents served Wu with a notice of intent by the "Tony Wu Recall" Political Action Committee (PAC) – which has formally started the process to recall him.

Organizers say their effort has been building for months.

The West Covina group has posted their notice online after collecting 79 signatures from registered voters, which were also submitted with the notice.

"We hope to relieve the residents of West Covina from his failed leadership and restore professionalism and ethics back into the city council chambers," said Steve Bennett, treasurer of the PAC.

The recall notice alleges that Wu does not have residents' best interests in mind, such as violating transparency, and attempting to censor free speech through changes in the Municipal Code. Recall supporters also have long criticized his pursuit of a municipal health department, which they said could pose a threat on the city's finances, and for his advocacy of development at the city's BKK Landfill.

Wu said that since 2019 he has heard about recall efforts that assailed the direction the city was taking. But all he can do is continue to work hard and do his best to improve the city, he said.

"The rest is in the hands of the residents," he added in an email statement on Thursday.

Opponents say Wu has caused significant damage to West Covina through his actions, resulting in a

\$4.1 million litigation settlement against the city, and other pending lawsuits. But the council member said this isn't the case.

"With the help of my council colleagues, we began to reform the city," he said. "We supported the newly hired manager that time when he terminated the fire and police chief due to the 98% disapproval rating for the fire chief and 95% disapproval rate for the police chief from their rank and file back in 2019."

On May 5, Larry Whithorn, a nearly 30-year veteran of the West Covina Fire Department, won a \$4.1 million jury verdict. He had alleged he was fired in 2019 after alleging age discrimination and retaliation for reporting a hostile work environment.

Wu and Planning Commissioner Glenn Kennedy allegedly started vocally pushing for Whithorn's firing more than a year before the fire chief received his actual termination letter, the lawsuit states.

Once Wu became part of the City Council majority in November 2018, Whithorn said, he was asked repeatedly by certain council members and the city's human resources director when he would be retiring. When Whithorn complained of a hostile work environment, he was reassured that only the city manager could fire him.

Residents also said that Wu at one time being under L.A. County sheriff's investigation was another concern.

West Covina's former city manager had filed a police report concerning Wu, accusing the elected official of threatening to punch him, according to city officials and filing documents.

The report was filed in February 2023 with the West Covina Police Department and was forwarded to officials with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, who confirmed they had opened an investigation. It's unclear what criminal charges, if any, could result.

The investigation followed a series of complaints about Wu's behavior from members of city staff, including Human Resources documents alleging that Wu's verbal outbursts create a hostile work environment at City Hall.

Wu denies all of the allegations, saying he has not lost his temper nor raised his voice at members of city staff or others but rather is friendly and supportive of staff.

Wu said he strongly believes in freedom of speech. He also said that he has a mission of serving the West Covina community and believes that one way is by bringing these new ideas to continue the city's growth.

As for establishing a local health department, he still believes that a West Covina health department will save lives.

"In 2020, as Mayor, I saw all the suffering and lack of resources from the LA County Health Department," he said in a statement. "We will follow Pasadena's Health department model with a neutral budget. We will receive around \$20 million from federal and state grants that will add services directly to our residents. We are currently in the final stages to be approved by CDHP."

As for the BKK landfill, it has been closed for almost 30 years and still is a "brownfield with pipes sticking out," he said. "It is aesthetically unpleasant and potentially harmful to residents. We are requesting the federal, state and county to find a solution with a sense of development to create an environmentally friendly and beautiful area such as open space, hiking trails, and amphitheater for generations to come to enjoy."

Wu said that he proved to have the trust of the majority of residents in November 2022 when he was re-elected, and that his participation in council can be seen through the improvements the city has had in the past few years – such as having a surplus budget, unions having contracts, more hires in the police and fire departments, and more police on patrol.

"I will continue to fight and work hard to serve our residents," he said.

But those who want to remove him were determined to push forward.

The next steps in the recall process will be for the group to publish a notice of intent and proof of that publication will be filed with the City Clerk's Office. There is a 10-day examination period that is done by

the office with a sample petition. Once that process is completed, the city clerk would give the group an approval to move forward.

Recall organizers would start to collect the needed signatures to get the recall on a ballot.

"Depending on the date that the city clerk gives the committee to move forward with circulating the petition, we are hoping that we would be able to collect the needed signatures, early enough to get this on the ballot by November," said Bennett, adding that the threshold for signatures is 20% of the registered voters in Council District 5, about 2,500 voters.

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