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Blanchard softens stand against Council

By CARLOS GALARZA
carlos@dailyjm.com

WALHALLA — Former Councilman George Blanchard said Wednesday that he would not file any ethics violation charges against Oconee County Council members after accusing them the night before of violating the Freedom of Information Act by meeting privately.

In resigning and vacating his District 1 Council seat, Blanchard criticized the Chairman Reg Dexter, Wayne McCall and Joel Thrift of coming to Council meetings "with their votes in place."

However, when asked if he would accuse the councilmen before state ethics officials, Blanchard said he would not.

"I'm not a policeman," he said. "I will not file a charge and never had any intent of doing that."

Pressed on whether the majority on the Council violated the law when they excluded him and Councilman Mario Suarez from drafting a letter terminating Administrator Dale Surrett during a meeting April 14, Blanchard again backed off.

"I feel we were excluded, but if you read the law, I don't think they violated anything," he said. "It lacked professionalism."

McCall called Blanchard's accusations Tuesday night as "borderline slander." On Wednesday, Dexter and Thrift denied they and McCall have ever met privately to discuss county business.



George Blanchard

"The remarks bother me because he was attacking my integrity and that of the other members," Dexter said. "I don't go around breaking the law."

Thrift said nobody tried to exclude Blanchard. He said the Council has too many big things on its plate to be caught with so much petty stuff.

"I'm sorry to see him resign," Thrift said. "He brought a lot of experience to the table."

County election officials circled Tuesday, Aug. 25 as the day for a special election to fill Blanchard's vacated seat.

Residents of District 1, which includes a large swathe of the county stretching from Salem and wrapping around unincorporated areas of Walhalla and Westminster, may begin filing their intention of seeking the seat beginning at noon May 8. The filing period closes at noon May 18.

Former District 1 Councilman Stephen Moore, who lost a re-election bid during a 2006 primary battle with Blanchard, already indicated months ago that he would run again for the seat. Other names have circulated, including that of government watchdog Susie Cornelius.

Should a primary be needed to determine the candidate of any particular political party, that election would be held on Tuesday, July 7, with any run-off elections set for Tuesday July 21.

County officials released the letter sent to Surrett a week ago formally stating the reason why his contract was terminated. The letter, dated April 15, a day after he was fired, was hand-delivered by U.S. Mail to Surrett on April 16.

It cites state statute 4-9-620, which says in part that the "term of employment of the administrator shall be at the pleasure of the council and he shall be entitled to such compensation for his services as the council may determine."

Dexter called a special meeting May 12, at 7 p.m., to allow Surrett to have his say.

Blanchard said he may attend the special meeting.

"I don't want to be a distraction to Dale at the meeting," Blanchard said. "If he wants me to attend and sit in the background, I will do so. If he wants me to speak, I would do so. I'll have to speak to Dale and see what he wants."