

CONTROVERSIAL LETTER'S TIMING CAUSES ORANGE COUNCIL STIR

BY LOCAL TALK STAFF

ORANGE : A nearly six-year-old letter pertaining to a City of Orange Township councilman's past brought controversy and upset to the City Hall meeting here Jan. 17.

West Ward resident Stephanie Blaine was allowed by Council President Tency Eason to start - but not finish - her presentation of a letter regarding West Ward Councilman Hassan Abdul-Rasheed during the meeting's citizen comments segment. The start and stop were made by Eason after consultation by City Attorney Marvin T. Braker and Legislative Research Officer Dwayne D. Warren.

The 15-minute exchange among the five people involved was sometimes loud and defensive, leading Abdul-Rasheed to apologize in the later council comment segment for his initial outburst.

Blaine, who was third among a list of 19 signed speakers, opened by saying that she had conducted an investigation and found through the Open Public Records Act an Aug. 2, 2006 letter regarding Abdul-Rasheed. Blaine asked Eason, as council president, if she could read that letter.

"I would ask the council president and the attorney to halt the speaker's letter reading," said Abdul-Rasheed. "I do not understand why this six-year-old letter is being presented tonight.

She has never called or met me about the letter, nor have I ever seen her in a council meeting before. This is a means of Mayor Eldridge Hawkins trying to discredit me."

"I don't know of the letter's content," said Braker, "so I can't say if the reading can be stopped."

"Let's pause and have the attorney read the letter," said Eason, "and see if it is derogatory."

Eason meanwhile consulted a dictionary on "derogatory" and read out her findings. Every citizen's comments portion on the regular meeting agenda states, "Any derogatory, abusive or threatening statements will not be permitted. The chair (Council President) will immediately rule such conduct out of order and terminate any further comments."

"There are several definitions," said Eason. "Derogatory means detracting from the character or standing of something. It means expressing a low opinion, disparaging or belittling."

Braker, after consultation with Warren, opined that the letter reader may go ahead - to which Abdul-Rasheed objected.

"The attorney is a mayoral appointee," said Abdul-Rasheed. "He is part of the administration. He works on behalf of the mayor."

Braker then counter-objected.

"I serve the people of the City of

Orange," stated Braker.

"Let's calm down," said Eason. "We the council rely on the attorney and the legislative research officer for their legal opinion."

Eason then turned back to S. Blaine.

"I'm allowing you to continue," said Eason. "I will stop you should you say anything derogatory."

Blaine continued by stating that the Aug. 3, 2006 letter was an opinion by attorney Gregory D. Winter, of the Livingston firm Winter & Winkler, to City Clerk Dwight Mitchell. The letter was concerning Maria C. Vandermeer & Hassan Abdul-Rasheed vs. The City of Orange Township.

Vandermeer and Abdul-Rasheed had contested the West Ward council seat in the May 2006 municipal election. That contest's results were brought before State Superior Court-Newark Assignment Judge Patricia Costello for a ruling. Costello transferred Vandermeer and Abdul-Rasheed to a colleague who eventually decided that voters had elected challenger Abdul-Rasheed over incumbent Vandermeer.

Winter, to Mitchell, stated that Abdul-Rasheed was ineligible for election because of state statute NJSA 19-4-1 (8). The attorney said that his information that Abdul-Rasheed, as Craig A. Miller, was found guilty of NJSA @A: 119-2A and 2A:94-1.1

on Sept. 26, 1995. Abdul-Rasheed, as Miller, was also found guilty in Plainfield Municipal Court on Dec. 16, 1975 for 2A:21-20B and 2A:170-775.

Blaine's reading of Winkler's letter go as far as stating that one of the charges "would be a crime of moral turpitude," when Abdul-Rasheed objected once more.

"I ask for a stop," said Abdul-Rasheed. "This is a character assassination. You know she's running as a council candidate."

"I have never disguised the fact that I'm running for council," said Blaine. "Now, Councilman, look me in the eye and --"

-- Address all comments to the chair," said Eason. "I'm cutting it off here and now. I must ask why, after all this time, you (Blaine) are bringing this up. West Ward voters had elected Abdul-Rasheed in 2006 and re-elected him in 2010."

With that, Blaine stepped away from the public speakers' podium and handed "Local Talk" a copy of Winter's letter.

Stephanie and husband Louis Blaine later told "Local Talk" that she is planning to run as an at-large council candidate. She is currently seeking signatures for her petition and is to have her campaign headquarters behind Vandermeer's bakery.

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"We're asking if the councilman had lied on his candidate application form," said L. Blaine. "We had a President who was not impeached because

of having oral sex in the White House but because he lied about it." Abdul-Rasheed, a Council President last year, apologized for his outbursts during the council comments.

"What the speaker was talking about had been adjudicated years ago," said Abdul-Rasheed. "I've a stack of

legal documents about it."

Abdul-Rasheed found a sympathetic ear with South Ward colleague and mayoral candidate Edward Marable, Jr.

"The exchange earlier this meeting made me think," said Marable. "When we enter public life, everything we do is up to scrutiny."

Eason, in her opening comments, was both empathetic and explanatory towards Abdul-Rasheed. "Politics can be a dirty business," said Eason. "I cut her off when her remarks became derogatory. I had to let her talk until then because it's a matter of freedom of speech." Eason then turned to prospective municipal

candidates and the public.

"This is an election season from now until May 8," said Eason. "I will not let these council meetings become a political football field - those who want to do that have the newspapers and other outlets. Be careful of what you see and hear."