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Posted on Thu, Apr. 24, 2003

The Mercury News

Housing agency lauded, then let go

MTN. VIEW OPTS FOR DIFFERENT P.A. GROUP

By Joshua L. Kwan
Mercury News

On the same night the Midpeninsula Citizens for Fair Housing agency received a plaque for its service to the city of Mountain View, the city council abruptly ended their 28-year relationship.

Officials with the Palo Alto non-profit group were stunned.

“They give us a plaque,” then they do this, said Mary Davey, a board member who co-founded the organization in 1965.

Without dissent, the city council on Tuesday night voted to dump the agency and award an annual contract potentially worth \$74,000 to Project Sentinel, another Palo Alto non-profit group with which Mountain View had worked over the years. But earlier that evening, Mountain View Mayor Mike Kasperzak had read a proclamation for Fair Housing Month that thanked Midpeninsula Citizens for Fair Housing for its work in fighting housing discrimination.

Since 1975, Midpeninsula Citizens for Fair Housing has provided services for Mountain View. It has contracts with Stanford University, 13 Peninsula cities and San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

Such groups assist residents in discrimination cases and disputes over contracts, evictions and other matters. Until

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Tuesday, Midpeninsula Citizens for Fair Housing officials thought they were doing a good job.

Adriana Garefalos, a senior planner with the city, wrote in her report to the council that both groups are "well-qualified" and that their proposals offered similar cost benefits.

She recommended Project Sentinel, however, saying the group's multilingual brochures and useful Web site make it more accessible to Mountain View's diverse community.

"It's a very important component," Garefalos said in an interview right after Tuesday's meeting.

In the staff report, Garefalos also pointed out that Midpeninsula Citizens for Fair Housing lacked a full-time executive director, and was considering a merger with another housing advocacy group in the East Bay called ECHO. It could take a year before the two services are integrated, Garefalos wrote.

To Marjorie Rocha, executive director of Midpeninsula Citizens for Fair Housing and ECHO, the implication is that the former is poorly run, which she strongly disputed. Rocha said the organizational changes have not affected the quality of work its staff provides.

In addition, Rocha faulted the staff report's conclusions. The boards of both groups had agreed to merge in February, and early last month she had assumed the permanent role of executive director for Midpeninsula Citizens for Fair Housing.

"We didn't get a chance to tell the council our story," Rocha said.

Garefalos had made her recommendation before the council heard the three-minute presentations from the two groups Tuesday night. Other agencies seeking federal grant money made their pitches to the council a month ago and city staff did not offer recommendations on their requests for funding. But Linda Lauzze, the city's administrative and neighborhood services manager, said because the fair housing services grant was more like a private contract, it was handled

differently.

`` While I appreciate how they feel, I don't think they should feel they were treated unfairly," Councilwoman Rosemary Stasek said of Midpeninsula Citizens for Fair Housing.

Mountain View's decision is especially important, Davey said, because it is the first of three cities to select a fair-housing agency for its residents.

Mountain View, Palo Alto and Sunnyvale are trying to pool their federal grant money and hire one non-profit group to coordinate their fair-housing services.

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