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Mtn. View official accused of threatening Microsoft

A representative of the software maker said the Housing Trust Fund does not meet its criteria for charitable giving and that she felt 'extortion' was used to push for a gift.

BY CHUCK CARROLL
Mercury News

A Microsoft Corp. official has accused Mountain View City Councilwoman Rosemary Stasek of vowing to bad-mouth the software giant after it refused to donate to a countywide housing trust fund -- a charge Stasek denies.

Robyn Holst, a state government affairs manager for Microsoft, said a council member threatened to "use every opportunity possible to publicly criticize Microsoft for not participating."

Holst didn't name Stasek when she made the charge April 19 as the committee planning the city's centennial celebration discussed whether council members should be asked to raise funds for next year's bash. But when word of the charge reached other city officials, they called Holst, and she told them it was Stasek.

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Stasek, who has launched a campaign for the state Assembly, was Mountain View's mayor last year at the time of the alleged remark. Holst called the comment "extortion, basically," according to a tape of the committee meeting.

"Absolutely not," Stasek said after a closed-door meeting Monday at City Hall with Holst, City Manager Kevin Duggan and Mayor Mario Ambra. "That is not the case, and I did not do that, and Robyn has acknowledged that that did not happen."

Holst refused to comment after the meeting, and a Microsoft spokesman declined several times to elaborate on the incident. The company has a campus east of Highway 101 in Mountain View.

Ambra said after the meeting that Holst and Microsoft wanted to drop the matter, but he said he would let the city council decide if it will investigate more.

"We're still in the fact-finding stage," Ambra said. But he said he was troubled by the accusation, and that Stasek was acting without the council's approval if she was soliciting funds from Microsoft for the housing trust.

The Housing Trust Fund is a public-private collaborative among government, non-profit groups and corporations. Its goal is to raise \$20 million by July 20 to help 5,000 Santa Clara County families a year qualify for a mortgage. The Silicon Valley Manufacturing Group is leading the fundraising drive.

Microsoft hasn't donated to the trust but is becoming a substantial valley donor. In 1999, the company donated more than \$1.6 million in cash and \$19 million in software to Bay Area causes.

Holst told committee members that she explained to Stasek the housing trust didn't meet Microsoft's criteria for charitable giving, but she wasn't specific. Mountain View is considering a contribution to the trust fund. Dozens of companies have already donated to the fund.

Stasek is not a member of the housing fund's steering committee, said Carl Guardino, CEO of the Silicon Valley Manufacturing Group. He said he understands the trust fund doesn't "meet everyone's giving guidelines," and hoped that Holst and Stasek could work things out amicably.

Stasek said she tries to avoid even the appearance of impropriety, and emphatically denied pressuring Holst. She said she didn't believe she was soliciting funds, although she did "mention" to

Holst the idea of Microsoft making a donation.

"I can appreciate that that was perceived incorrectly," said Stasek, who plans to battle at least two other Democrats in 2002 for the District 22 state Assembly seat held by Elaine Alquist, who can't run again because of term limits.

"I can tell you I'm going to be very, very sensitive to that in the future. One thing I've learned as a public official is that what you're saying and how people are perceiving what you're saying is very different."

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