

Farmland Working Group

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TURLOCK: CONCERNS GROW

Turlock Mayor Amy Bublak must remember she's a team member, not a monarch



Now is Amy Bublak's time to rise and shine — or crash and burn.

With two newly elected members of the Turlock City Council in her corner, Mayor Bublak finally has control of a majority vote. She swiftly wielded this newfound power to usher the city manager and city attorney out the door (both are still in motion) and to bring new ones in who see things more as she sees them.

If this sounds familiar, recall that her predecessor, Gary Soiseth, lasted only one term partly because his "I am the boss; better do what I say" style ran off two city managers and several department heads, and rubbed too many voters the wrong way. Bublak should remember that. Bublak also has the enormous, undeserved blessing of \$11 million more a year to play with, thanks to passage in November of Measure A, a citywide sales tax increase that Bublak fought but will be happy to spend. Soiseth would have given much for that advantage.

New power, new voting bloc, new top-tier staff, new money — Bublak is on top of the heap. She'd better make the most of it.

With all that momentum swinging her way, the mayor of Stanislaus County's second-largest city must perform like nobody's business if she expects to keep her job when up for reelection in less than two years. All of Turlock is watching.

Not everyone is impressed, and some are openly fretting — with good reason. It scares people when any leader is bent on amassing more power. Bublak's gambits to control meeting agendas and to control messaging of city officials are unsettling. Does she really want an authoritarian reputation?

UNEXPECTED TURNOVER IN TURLOCK

A few have complained of whiplash from the swift and sudden pending departures of City Manager Toby Wells and City Attorney Doug White, to be replaced with familiar faces. Gary Hampton previously said he was bullied out as city manager under Soiseth and former City Attorney Phaedra Norton. George Petrulakis, a longtime political adviser throughout the county and particularly in Modesto, will be Turlock's city attorney despite not having a lick of experience.

Hampton knows Turlock inside and out and was a solid administrator before. My guess is he'll do fine. I've called Petrulakis "King George" for years because of his self-appointed role as kingmaker, recruiting and advising mostly conservative candidates and office holders including former Modesto Mayor Ted Brandvold. Petrulakis usually just laughs.

The bread and butter of a land use attorney like Petrulakis is development, a sector that has struggled since the

Continued page 4

Our Mission: To preserve the agricultural foundation of our region and promote smart growth in our urban communities through education, outreach and action.

Turlock hires interim city attorney. Why did his politics come into question?

By Kristin Liam

The Modesto Bee - Feb. 25, 2021

A divided Turlock City Council on Tuesday hired George Petrulakis as interim city attorney, despite concerns raised about his political involvement and experience in land use instead of municipal law.

The council approved a contract with his firm Petrulakis Law & Advocacy, with Mayor Amy Bublak and Council Members Pam Franco and Rebecka Monez in the 3-2 majority. Petrulakis is set to begin working Monday, after outgoing City Attorney Doug White's resignation becomes effective Sunday.

Longtime Turlock resident Jeani Ferrari and former Mayor Brad Bates called attention to Petrulakis's lack of municipal law experience in public comments. Ferrari also questioned whether Petrulakis can give objective legal advice given his political activity in Stanislaus County. Petrulakis worked as a political strategist for former Modesto Mayor Ted Brandvold's 2016 mayoral campaign, Petrulakis confirmed to The Bee. Among other Republican-leaning officials and candidates, Petrulakis donated to were former Stanislaus County Sheriff Adam Christianson in the 2010 election and Brett McBay's bid for the Modesto City Schools board in the 2013 election.

"In what has become a very divided political community, it is more important than ever to work with a public servant who is not involved with partisan politics, and doesn't come with a political agenda," Ferrari said. "It would be highly irregular to hire George Petrulakis given his client list and extensive political activity in our county. This, coming on the heels of circumspect special meetings and a complete lack of transparency, is very concerning."

The council has held six special city council meetings in the last two months, including a Jan. 7 meeting during which they announced White's resignation and placing City Manager Toby Wells on investigatory leave. Bublak told The Bee she does not see Petrulakis's political activity as a problem, adding how she has no issue with how Petrulakis supported one of her opponents in the 2018 mayoral election. The city's lawyer handling human resources issues also examined any potential conflicts of interest Petrulakis has, Bublak said.

"If there were any tells that told me that he wasn't going to be ethical and serve our city in its totality, I wouldn't have voted yes," Bublak said.

Petrulakis said he understands the concern, but any lawyer who practices in a professional manner is unbiased. While working as interim city attorney, Petrulakis said he will not donate to any political candidates for the City of Turlock. He added he is not currently hired as a consultant for any political official.

The contract for legal services the council approved Tuesday also includes an agreement that the city and Petrulakis will evaluate his pay within 60 days. The contract differs from White's in several aspects, including Petrulakis charging \$300 per hour for general legal services versus White's about \$30,000 monthly retainer fee for the first 155 hours of such services. The reassessment provision is meant to ensure the city gets cost-effective legal services in the transition, Petrulakis said.

Even with the city attorney change, the city expects to stay within its legal budget for the rest of this fiscal year, Acting City Manager Gary Hampton wrote in a staff report. White told The Bee his law firm charged about \$195 per hour for the monthly retainer hours because of a 1.1% increase to the rates in the initial March 2019 contract accounting for cost of living rising. After the retainer hours, his firm charged about \$197 per hour for general legal services, still below Petrulakis's fees.

To advise the council during a three-hour-long council meeting, Petrulakis is set to charge the city \$900 versus how White charged about \$600 at most. White's firm also charged about \$250 per hour for special counsel legal services such as enterprise funds, a separate category for which Petrulakis does not have a different rate, however.



Worth repeating — Support Turlock's Smart Growth Tradition

By Denny Jackman
The Modesto Bee - Sept. 3, 2010

On August 23, a joint meeting of the Turlock City Council and Planning Commission was held. Citizen input compiled from several General Plan Update Community Meetings as well as data relevant to the city's land use, history and projected growth was used by city staff and the consultant to present three plans for consideration by the council and commission. At the end of the discussion, the council would vote on a chosen growth scenario. From that scenario, the consultant and staff would move to the environmental impact review.

One Master Plan Area included infill and growth to the southeast, utilizing Turlock's current general plan. Another Master Plan area included the Southeast Master Plan as well as a Northwest Master Plan that would put residential development west of Hwy 99. The third option was a large growth area, including southeast and northwest growth; it appeared to be included to make the first two Growth Scenarios appear legitimate.

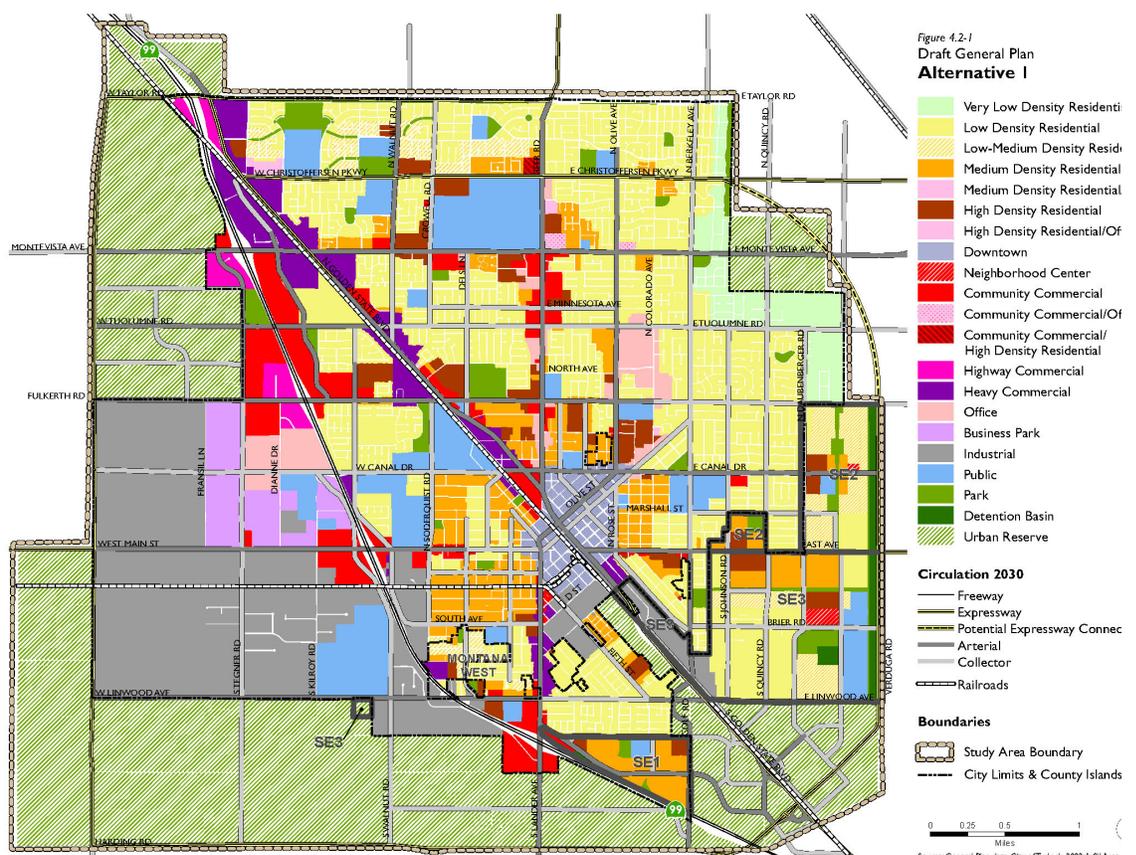
Several citizens spoke of the logic of developing the southeast, utilizing infill and compact growth and keeping residential development east of Hwy 99 (Turlock's general plan shows no residential development west of the freeway). As the evening wore on and it appeared that Councilmen Ted Howze, Kurt Spycher and Councilwoman Amy Bublak were not in agreement with the audience, Mayor Lazar asked each planning commissioner for their preference.

Every commissioner supported the south-

east Master Plan and rejected the Northeast Master Plan addition. The reasons varied but each commissioner said growth should remain confined to the southeast. Seven commissioners and one alternate flatly rejected residential growth west of the freeway. Lazar and Councilwoman Jackson also rejected the scenario to move residential growth west of the freeway.

Many professional planners consider Turlock's general plan the model of smart growth in the valley. Past councils have used the freeway and railroad as the boundary to residential growth. Thanks to a commitment to smart growth, it is still possible to drive across town in a matter of minutes, shop at one of the busiest shopping centers in the area or buy fresh local produce at the farmers' market downtown.

Turlock's current general plan is committed to growing compactly so the town remains surrounded by productive farmland. The plan has an urban boundary at Taylor Road, protecting farmland and important water recharge area and keeping Keyes and Turlock as distinct communities. Developing to the southeast directs growth onto poorer



Continued from page 1

recession 13 years ago. Why not try something new? Although he has no experience as municipal counsel, Petrulakis knows how local government runs, at least from the political side. And he's less likely to oppose his buddy Bublak based on institutional knowledge, or the inertia of doing something a certain way because that's how it's always been done. I wonder, however, how he'll adjust to being in the public eye as opposed to running things behind the scenes, a much easier place to hide.

People not on board with Bublak's agenda could be in for a rocky ride. We've already seen more 3-2 votes on this newly constituted council than I would prefer, suggesting that Turlock could slide into the kind of dysfunction that plagued Modesto before Mayor Sue Zwahlen took the gavel on Tuesday. Similar animus will afflict Ceres until a fifth tie-breaking member joins its council. Nobody wants that for Turlock.

DON'T BLOW IT, BUBLAK

Bublak's task, then, is to cobble as many unanimous votes as possible in the remaining two years of her term; for

the record, newcomers Pam Franco and Rebecka Monez have been siding with the mayor, with Andrew Nosrati and Nicole Larson dissenting in some votes such as hiring Petrulakis.

Bublak says she's up to the challenge.

"I've dreamed for at least the last two years," she said, "of doing what I said I would do" when she unseated the polarizing Soiseth in 2018. She expects big votes in coming weeks addressing road repairs and homelessness, she said, followed in coming months by filling department head vacancies and key decisions on outsourcing various city services. The latter could prove politically dangerous in a proud community like Turlock.

So good luck, Madame Mayor. Remember that teamwork and unanimity go a long way with voters. If you think a legacy of distrust and split votes can't hurt you as long as you get your way, you might ask Soiseth and Brandvold how that worked out for them.

By Garth Stapley
The Modesto Bee - Feb. 26, 2021

Continued from page 2

Both charged and are set to charge the city about \$350 per hour for reimbursable services, which include developer-funded land use projects.

For the 2019-2020 fiscal year, White said his law firm charged \$415,000 for general legal services, which was over the city's initial budget by \$15,000 or about 4%. His firm went over the monthly retainer hours every month of the 2020 calendar year, Franco said during the meeting. The council did not interview any other firms besides Petrulakis Law & Advocacy for interim city attorney services, Bublak said. It was the council's responsibility to come up with potential candidates Bublak added, and Petrulakis's

name was the only one provided within the time limits. When the city hires more human resource staff, Bublak said they can search for someone to fill the job and other currently interim director positions on a permanent basis.

Bublak further welcomed Petrulakis and said she suspects he is a quick learner.

"This is an opportunity for Turlock to grow with a different perspective and understanding of law," Bublak said. "So, I'm really excited because I think that this will bring so many new enhancements for Turlock."

Continued from page 3

soils that are less productive. Additionally, the southeast area is underutilized, needs repurposing and infill. Growing to the southeast will use existing infrastructure and city services. This is the smartest kind of growth.

Turlock's current general plan has the capacity to accommodate growth for twenty years. Turlock should continue the vision of past city councils to grow compactly, protect world-class farmland and keep city services and public safety, efficient and affordable. The general plan

update must utilize realistic population projections as well as hard facts on the economic condition of the state, county and city.

Farmland Working Group encourages the voters to consider smart growth and farmland protection in the upcoming election, when two council seats are to be filled. Take time to learn the candidates' platforms on land use. Three votes on the Turlock City Council can undo decades of smart growth and farmland protection overnight.



WE ARE WATCHING...

City of Turlock

www.ci.turlock.ca.us

In a series of mainly 3-2 votes since January, the Turlock City Council has had a flurry of meetings resulting in the replacement of both its City Manager and City Attorney. Most of this has been done in closed sessions and unscheduled special meetings. More concerning than the lack of transparency during these changes has been the absence of any justification given for this dramatic course change. The appointment of George Petrulakis as interim city attorney is also concerning. Mr. Petrulakis' professional focus has been primarily in land use and development. No other attorney was interviewed for the opening and it is questionable whether he met the city's outlined minimum requirements while potentially costing more than the previous city attorney, Doug White.

The Turlock City Council on a 3-2 vote also took steps to disallow council members from putting items on the agenda. As it stands now, the mayor is the only person that can place items on the agenda for council meetings. All these moves seem to point towards the City of Turlock prioritizing development work and pushing through an agenda with the three vote block of Monez, Franco and Bublak. At a recent last minute housing workshop, there was

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discussion of addressing some of the constraints of housing construction and reexamining aspects of the city's general plan and development impact fees. It remains to be seen if the Turlock City Council will take the path of fiscally responsible infill or seek to annex, rezone or expand its sphere of influence resulting in the premature conversion of farmland.

Stanislaus County

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On another note, the Stanislaus County Council of Government (StanCOG) will adopt the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) methodology for Stanislaus County this year. This is a process by which the State of California through the Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) estimates the total number of housing units expected to be built at four different income levels i.e. very low, low, moderate, and above moderate. Each county's Council of Governments allocates these housing numbers to each municipality within the county every eight years.

It is arguable whether this process is useful or even necessary, but it is consequential to the land use decisions that are made by our local municipalities. These numbers give no consideration to water availability, cities' ability to provide infrastructure and are not based on any verifiable demographic trends. Historically, the housing numbers received from the State have been far in excess of what ultimately gets built. There is concern emerging amongst local planners that the mandated housing numbers for this cycle may be even more aggressive than historical standards given Governor Newsom's housing goals.

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Farmland Working Group

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Striving to protect food, families & farmland. Since 1999.

Smart Growth: Growing Our Cities While Protecting Our Farmland and Quality of Life

It will not be the State of California or the County that protects the important farmland surrounding Turlock. The State and County have fixed borders. It will be up to the cities in Stanislaus County, as well as those in the surrounding region of the Central Valley, to protect the state's most important non-renewable resource, the agricultural land and high quality irrigation system that makes this farmland the world's most productive.

Jeani Ferrari
Public comment – City of Turlock Joint
City Council and Planning Commission meeting
February 29, 2011