

# Sanger mayor resigns, cites conflict with City Council members

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Sanger Mayor Joshua Mitchell said Wednesday he plans to resign, citing persistent conflicts with three other council members that he said had driven out top city employees responsible for Sanger's economic revival.

Mitchell filed a letter of resignation with Sanger City Clerk Becky Hernandez on Wednesday morning and said he will not attend any more City Council meetings. His resignation will become official within 30 days after he ties up loose ends, he said. He added that he has no plans to seek another, higher office.

Mitchell cited clashes with Council Members Humberto Garza, Eli Ontiveros and Raul Cantu as the main reason for his exit. Garza declined to address specifics of Mitchell's claims and said simply that he wished him well. Ontiveros and Cantu could not be reached for comment.

Mitchell pointed to an emergency City Council meeting in December that was held to discuss firing City Manager Brian Haddix. Mitchell was an ardent supporter of Haddix and accused Ontiveros, Cantu and Garza of meeting illegally to discuss Haddix's removal. The council eventually voted 4-0, with Mitchell abstaining, in favor of keeping Haddix.

"When they (Garza, Ontiveros and Cantu) came together to make a decision fire our city manager, I knew this city was headed down the wrong path," Mitchell said. "And I knew there was nothing I was going to be able to do to stop it."

He said he decided in December to resign but opted to remain in office until Haddix, who he credited with much of Sanger's recent economic rebirth, found a new job. Haddix announced in May he would be leaving for a similar role in Chowchilla.

Mitchell confirmed that Dan Spears, manager of community and economic development for the city, also submitted a letter of resignation. He added that two other unnamed city employees plan to leave.

Mitchell said a series of personal attacks against himself and his family — including the burning of his campaign office and various acts of vandalism — was also a major factor in his resignation.

He said he had moved his family out of Sanger for their own protection, and he currently lives in a rented home within the city to avoid any residency issues. He laid the blame for many of these attacks at the feet of his three adversaries in the council.

Sanger police Chief Silver Rodriguez said that his department is investigating several crimes in which Mitchell was a victim.

Rodriguez said that Mitchell's tires were slashed several times, his landscaping business was vandalized and several written death threats were sent to the departing mayor. He added that the campaign office fire was deemed an arson.

He said he did not know if anyone had been arrested.

The Sanger Police Department instituted a policy around a year ago in which any reports of crimes committed by elected officials are automatically referred to the Fresno County Sheriff's Office for investigation, Rodriguez said. He added that most of these complaints have dried up and said that no criminal investigations are currently underway into any of the Sanger City Council members.

Mitchell has served in Sanger government since December 2010, when he won a spot on the City Council replacing José Villarreal, who retired due to health concerns. He was named acting mayor and later won re-election in 2012 and 2014.

Mitchell was mayor during a period of economic growth in Sanger that saw increased real estate development, decreased crime and cuts in city spending. In 2010, Sanger was in the red by more than \$634,000. By December 2014, the city had a \$36,000 surplus.

In June 2014, Mitchell was fined \$7,000 by the state's Fair Political Practices Commission for not timely reporting of campaign contributions and using personal funds for re-election without first depositing them into a campaign account during his 2012 re-election.

The fine was the result of an agreement between Mitchell and the commission. Mitchell said in June that the violations were the result of "honest, procedural mistakes" by an inexperienced candidate and his volunteer staff.

Fair Political Practices Commission spokesman Jay Wierenga said Wednesday there is currently an open conflict-of-interest investigation into whether Mitchell's landscaping company, Western Landscape Development, Inc., profited from working on city residential developments.

According to a claim filed with the FPPC in November, the council voted unanimously on Sept. 1, 2011, on a resolution to waive all residential development fees. The claimant alleges that Mitchell's company made thousands of dollars from 2012 to 2014 and paid no residential impact fees as the direct result of Mitchell and the council's vote.

Wierenga declined to identify who made the claim.

In his Wednesday news conference, Mitchell said this investigation and dozens of similar ones were all the result of snipe attempts from political opponents.

"My wife and I have spent thousands of dollars to defend ourselves from these personal attacks," he said. "A mayor in the city of Sanger makes less than \$500 a month. It's cost me more than I've ever made, so no one can ever say that my heart wasn't in the right spot."

He added: "There is no pending investigation, and there is no one that's going to arrest me anytime soon."

Mitchell said he believes no conflict of interest exists provided his company started work more than a full year after the vote.

The FPPC claim does not give an exact date for when Western Landscape Development began work on the project.

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