

Des Moines council faces deadlock - Wasson resigns, citing state's investigation

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The scandal-related resignation of City Councilman Don Wasson has plunged Des Moines into more political turmoil and uncertainty, with the six remaining council members expected to deadlock on many issues, including the vote to appoint Wasson's successor.

Wasson, 76, resigned immediately after Thursday night's City Council meeting, citing the physical and financial toll of fighting allegations that he concealed \$49,000 in campaign contributions during the 2001 campaign. The contributions were used to help elect three council members: Maggie Steenrod, Richard Benjamin and Gary Petersen.

Wasson apologized for making "some mistakes" during the 2001 campaign.

Wasson's departure "is going to mean our council will be even less productive than it's been over the last year," said Audrey Bowers, a former councilwoman who is leading an effort to recall Wasson and his council allies.

Under state law, council members have 90 days to appoint Wasson's successor. If they cannot agree on a candidate, the responsibility will fall to the Metropolitan King County Council.

Wasson gave up his position as mayor of Des Moines in January because of the campaign scandal.

The state Public Disclosure Commission is scheduled to take up the Wasson case March 25. PDC staff members have alleged that Wasson and businessman Hank Hopkins broke state law by failing to disclose the \$49,000 in campaign contributions.

The \$49,000 came from Hopkins, who wants to build a conveyor system to transport about 15 million cubic yards of fill from the Des Moines waterfront to a proposed third runway at Sea-Tac Airport. Hopkins hoped the contributions would help elect a council majority that was less opposed to the third runway and his conveyor system.

It isn't clear what impact Wasson's resignation will have on the PDC's case. "I don't know if resigning is a remedy for breaking the law. Those are the kinds of determinations that will be made by the commission," PDC spokesman Doug Ellis said.

In his resignation statement, Wasson said he was driven from office, "in large part," by "false accusations."

However, he admitted he "inadvertently made some mistakes" during the campaign "and in responding to questions asked of me by the PDC."

Wasson initially told PDC investigators he did not receive a \$1,000 check from Hopkins. But when they produced the check with Wasson's signature on it, he changed his story.

Wasson declined to comment further on his resignation. His lawyer, John Wolfe, did not return a call.

Bob Young: 206-464-2174 or byoung@seattletimes.com

Don Wasson (0392749182)

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