

Club boots learning center director

By Mike Wright

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A simmering feud in Old Homosassa over control of the Homosassa Learning Center erupted this week with ouster of the director, the wife of a former Citrus County commissioner.

The decision was made in mid-December by the Homosassa Civic Club board of directors and announced during the club's membership meeting Monday night.

On Tuesday, board members changed the locks and told now former director Joanne Bartell to remove her belongings, threatening to seek trespassing charges against her if she attempted to again set foot on the site.

Bartell didn't attend Monday's meeting because her husband, former Commissioner Gary Bartell, was in a Brooksville hospital receiving medical care in connection to an accident he was involved in Saturday night.

On Wednesday, Joanne Bartell alleged the civic club had removed the Homosassa Learning Center Inc. from the property without a proper eviction process.

Rodney MacRae, a civic association member who is often jokingly referred to as the "mayor" of unincorporated Homosassa due to his family's longevity, said the center is still operating and that only Bartell was removed.

"She was an employee. She did not lease that building," he said. "The Learning Center was not hers. The organization belongs to the civic club. She wasn't a tenant and now she's out of the building."

Joanne Bartell said she contacted about a dozen parents of children who regularly attend the learning center to let them know the civic association had removed her and she would not be there at 3:30 p.m. when kids usually arrive. Bartell said she did not tell them the learning center had closed.

Terry Green, whose position as civic club president began Monday, said his wife Kathy is staffing the learning center while plans are in the works to develop tutoring programs in coordination with Homosassa Elementary School.

He said club members compiled numerous complaints about Mrs. Bartell's handling of the program.

The learning center is in the old Homosassa fire station, which the county gave to the civic club in 2013.

The late Jim Bitter, a civic club president, appointed Mrs. Bartell as the learning center director, Green said.

There is no formal lease for the building. A learning center committee appointed by the civic club to help oversee the programs decided last spring to incorporate as a nonprofit organization, Mrs. Bartell said, so that it would be easier to obtain grants.

Until a year ago, Mrs. Bartell was paid \$500 a week from grants the program was receiving. Bartell said she has not been paid since January 2016.

Some members of the civic club attempted in October to change the locks and force Bartell from the premises. The sheriff's office was called and deputies told them they did not have authority to change the locks.

The learning center committee proposed a building use agreement to the civic club, which tabled the decision in November until this month.

However, the civic club board of directors, minus the husband-wife members who are Bartell supporters, met in December and decided to reject the lease agreement without a membership vote, according to a recording of the meeting that Bartell provided to the Chronicle.

Green said the meeting was recorded without any of the participants' knowledge. Bartell said someone left a USB drive of the recording on her car in an envelope and she doesn't know where it came from.

Also at that meeting, the board voted to fire Bartell, according to the recording.

Green said he made the announcement at Monday night's membership meeting, even though he and others were told beforehand that Joanne Bartell would not be there because her husband was hospitalized.

He said he wasn't sure whether to believe that news.

"Because of all the issues of Joanne telling the truth, I was skeptical," he said. "Was this being made up to give her more time? Those were the thoughts that went through my mind."

Also, an email sent to club members from a Homosassa Civic Club email address shortly before the meeting started stated the learning center issue would not be discussed because of the Bartell's medical emergency.

Who sent the email is a mystery.

Green said Bartell sent it herself from a duplicate club website for which only Bartell has administrative rights.

Mrs. Bartell denied sending the email.

"I did not send it," said Bartell, who said she also received the email. "What purpose would I have of sending it? I didn't believe them for a second that they wouldn't bring the issue up."

Bartell said by changing locks, the civic club board illegally evicted the Homosassa Learning Center Inc. She said she is speaking with an attorney about possible court action in response.

"If they don't want the Homosassa Learning Center Inc. in there, they need to take me to court," she said. "I'm pretty certain to kick a tenant out like that you need to follow through with regular eviction proceedings."

Green, who said he also consulted with an attorney, said he is eager to open the learning center for its purpose.

"We want to have the place open," he said. "We want people to come in."

Gary Bartell was released from the hospital and is recuperating at home, his wife said.

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