

Ald. Lockett on Mayor Welch: 'It's no longer his show'

Political power shift in Country Club Hills?

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Dwight Welch has been elected mayor of Country Club Hills for seven straight terms, but measures taken by the city council at a contentious special meeting last week may have signaled a shift in power.

In a meeting that Welch refused to attend, aldermen voted Friday to reduce mayoral powers in areas such as signing off on city bills, making council committee appointments, handing out official city identification badges and overseeing the Country Club Hills Theater.

Ald. Vincent Lockett (2nd), who ran against Welch in April, said the mayor hasn't been showing up at recent meetings "because it's no longer his show."

The fate of one of Welch's pet projects — the theater — is in question after the city council refused to authorize funding for this year's summer concert series. Aldermen are weighing the potential costs of hosting the series and have called another special meeting at 6 p.m. Wednesday at city hall to address the issue.

The season's first concert, featuring the Isley Brothers, is scheduled for Saturday. Tickets were still being sold on the theater website Monday.

Perhaps the most significant amendment passed Friday requires that the city treasurer, Rhonda Williams, sign every check the city issues. Previously, the city clerk and/or mayor could sign checks, but two signatures now are required and one must be the treasurer.

Williams was elected treasurer in April, and there have been disagreements between Welch and Williams on what falls under her purview.

Williams said one disagreement devolved into Welch verbally abusing her and resulted in Welch calling for Police Chief Regina Evans to arrest her.

"He used very inappropriate language. He was just trying to use bullying and intimidation to get his way. Change is hard," Williams said.

Reached by phone a day after the meeting, Welch saw the incident differently, saying Williams was trying to leave city hall with signed documents that can't leave the building. He said he simply told her that she wouldn't be leaving with the papers.

Evans could not be reached for comment.

Lockett also reiterated at Friday's meeting his contention that Welch hasn't been forthcoming on the city's financial condition and alleged that city credit cards have been misused. Welch said suggestions of financial improprieties are absurd.

"Our books are reviewed every year by outside auditors, the same auditors who check the books of hundreds of Illinois towns," Welch said. "Each year, they give us good grades. If there were problems, we would have known long ago."

The city has been operating without a budget since its fiscal year started May 1. The city council Friday authorized vouchers to pay bills accumulated through April, with the exception of those related to the theater's summer season.

The council also amended an ordinance that will spell out who gets official city identification badges and states badges shall not be used for personal gain, including getting "special consideration by a law enforcement agency," getting preferred parking or free merchandise or services or avoiding traffic citations. The city council also voted to take over appointing committee chairmen.

On the measures that reduced Welch's powers, some of the votes were split, and others were unanimous. Even before aldermen took their seats, there was contentiousness over who would run the meeting in Welch's absence. Ald. Tyrone Hutson (3rd) served as mayor pro tem.

Welch has cited political retribution on the part of aldermen as his reason for not attending recent meetings.

"I attend all meetings I'm required to be a part of," he said Saturday. "But I have no desire to include myself in all this rigmarole. I feel bad for the people of Country Club Hills. It's obvious that some in city council are more interested in political vindictiveness than steering the city."

Lockett said, "I'm proud that the city is moving in the right direction. It's just a shame it's taken this long."

- **Caption:** Welch Lockett

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