Ouster prompts citizen's action

By RAY ROUTHIER
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WINSTED — Charging that four selectmen conspired in secret to fire the town manager, some residents are banding together with the hope that they can make town government more open.

The Citizens' Coalition for Open Government was formed Wednesday by Charlene LaVoie, the town's community lawyer, after she had gotten dozens of calls from residents upset over the selectmen's actions.

"People want to do something; they're furious," LaVoie said. "What the selectmen did is a breakdown in the way government is supposed to work."

The group will hold its first meeting Sunday to discuss goals and a course of action, said LaVoie, whose position is funded by the Shafeek Nader Trust.

The group was formed just two days after four of the seven selectmen voted to fire Town Manager Wayne W. Dove despite objections from more than 150 residents, many of whom said the selectmen had given no specific reasons for their action.

The same four selectmen, Democrats James A. Petit, Nancy Peters Habbal and Republicans William H. McCabe and Francis J. O'Neill Jr., voted McCabe into the mayor's seat two weeks ago before Democrat John F. Gauger Jr. had been sworn in and after Democrats Brian W. Sullivan and Walter D. Miller had walked out in protest.

One of the new group's organizers, planning and zoning commission Chairman Thomas Carey, said he and others are upset with what they think are "secret deals" struck to get McCabe in power, fire Dove and give town attorney Mark Svoukis a $35-an-hour raise.

"These deals are just the tip of the iceberg," Carey said. "Hopefully our group will grow large enough to convince the selectmen that what they're doing is wrong."

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>
> **Charlene LaVoie**
> Town's community lawyer

Despite public outcries, McCabe repeated Wednesday that he and his supporters are acting in the town's best interest. He would not comment on the formation of the new group, except to say, "It's a secret to me."

The selectmen who voted to fire Dove said publicly that they had a lack of confidence in the manager and thought he could not carry out the policies of the board. But Sullivan sent a letter to the town ethics commission Wednesday charging that at least one member, O'Neill, had a personal vendetta against Dove.

Dove is a probable witness in a court case contesting more than $14,000 O'Neill was given by the town, above his pension, when he retired from the Winsted Police Department in June. Sullivan claims O'Neill wants to discredit Dove's potential as a witness, since Dove opposed giving O'Neill the money.

"I can give the ethics commission witnesses who heard O'Neill say he wanted to be a selectman so he could get Dove," Sullivan said. "If he loses the court case, he loses the money."

O'Neill was elected to the board Nov. 5. He could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Ethics commission Chairman Francis MacGregor said Wednesday that once all the commission members see the letter, they'll have to decide whether it's in their jurisdiction before holding a hearing on it.

Section 7 of the town's code of ethics states that officials are forbidden to have any financial interest "which is in conflict with the proper discharge of his duties in the public interest or will impair his independence of judgement or action . . ."

Meanwhile, Dove said Wednesday he will not decide until next week whether to request a public hearing on his firing. A hearing is scheduled for Dec. 3, if Dove wants it, and McCabe said that the board won't begin looking for a new town manager at least until then.

The meeting of the Citizens' Coalition for Open Government is scheduled for Sunday at 2:30 p.m. in the auditorium of the Gilbert School.