

In senior housing fight

PRIDE head blasts innuendo tactics

By MARY CONNELLY-SZCZESNY

The leader of a senior housing citizen's group in Birmingham accused former mayor Robert Kelly of "McCarthyism tactics" and "gutter politics" this week.

The city's senior housing issue reverted to a bitter battle between the former mayor and James Lafferty, co-chairman of PRIDE, a senior housing lobbying group.

The group opposed a \$4.5 million senior housing bond issue formulated by commissioners and defeated at the polls earlier this month by voters.

Kelly, at a city commission meeting Monday, asked for PRIDE's membership list, an accounting of the group's financial status and its registration as a political organization.

Kelly also asked Lafferty to outline his history, years of residency in Birmingham and referred to a 1971 Detroit News story which he said told of a trip by Lafferty to Hanoi at North Vietnamese expense.

"DID YOU GO TO Hanoi as a guest of the government over there? Were you in Hanoi in 1971?" Kelly asked Lafferty. "Is this the type of housing — something you saw in Hanoi? What is your organization?"

Lafferty, an attorney, defended his record as anti-war activist but said his activities opposing the Vietnam war had no "relevance" to the housing controversy in Birmingham. He also charged Kelly with "slandorous innuendo."

"I intend to answer all your questions," Lafferty told Kelly. "I'm willing to stand here all night. But I'm not going to ask you all questions about

your past because I think it's irrelevant."

"You make reference to the antiwar movement. In 1971, I traveled everywhere in the world that would let me in. I made efforts to go to Saigon but was denied. I was granted permission to Hanoi, Laos, Thailand, among others. I would again because I was very concerned about the issue of peace."

"I AM PROUD of the past," Lafferty said. "But it has no relevance to senior citizen housing."

"These are McCarthyism tactics. It's time the people in this community decry this type of guilt by innuendo."

"Other members of PRIDE have come to commission meetings and given their names and addresses and been subjected to the same slandering innuendo you've subjected me to tonight. They've had to listen to your trip about their motives, their intentions."

The dispute erupted after Lafferty called on the commission to revive the issue of senior citizen housing after defeat of the bond issue at the polls.

PRIDE asked the commission to consider forming a coalition of groups interested in housing to formulate new housing proposals.

PRIDE would be part of that coalition, Lafferty suggested.

"What is PRIDE?" asked Kelly. "As far as I'm concerned, PRIDE consists of basically yourself Mr. Lafferty."

"I think it's down to the time the public deserves to know who is PRIDE, what is PRIDE? I wonder if you would consider giving us some of your history of yourself, your past, how long you've lived here?"

"I wonder if you would consider submitting the membership of PRIDE to

the commission and an outline of the organization?"

ONE COMMISSIONER Tuesday was critical of Kelly's statements.

"Mr. Kelly appeared to be speaking for the commission but he was not speaking for this commission," Commissioner Gary Kain said. "People have the right to associate and be secure in their right to privacy. While I do not agree with PRIDE nor condone the past activities of some PRIDE people, I respect their right to work within the system to effect change. What was done at the meeting smacks of an era which hopefully is behind us."

Kelly criticized PRIDE for suggesting another ballot issue. Three have been defeated since last April.

"To torment this community with another ballot when they seem to have voted it down. I say give seniors a tax break on their homes. That's what seniors want."

Lafferty told Kelly that all PRIDE meetings have been public and that commissioners have not accepted invitations to attend.

"Anytime anyone has needed to know something, they only had to come to the meeting and there find the members of our group," he said.

"We don't have a membership list or membership cards. We have a bank account and an address. We organize people at coffee on Saturdays. We are registered with the county."

"This business about a list is the very kind of tactic I'm talking about," Lafferty said. "For city officials to ask for a list smacks of the worst kind of politics. Our members are never shy. They don't wear masks. I hope no group in this city submits a membership list to be subjected to innuendo campaigns."

"PRIDE is in favor of senior citizen housing," Lafferty said. "Everything we do we do in public. We don't intend to give up until there is senior housing for the needy."

THE QUARREL overshadowed the issue of senior housing and commissioners did not respond to PRIDE's request for a new coalition to formulate housing proposals.

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