

PUBLIC MOOD IS TENSE, FEARFUL

By **Roger Phillips**

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STOCKTON - Retired city employees expressed fear for their medical benefits.

Homeless citizens asked why the city devotes public-safety resources to uprooting them from their makeshift lodgings when police services are so challenged.

A Valley Springs vintner who bills himself as an "international political and business consultant" floated his own idea to help the city avoid insolvency: a huge cost-free loan.

Stockton's ongoing bankruptcy saga reached its dramatic climax at Tuesday night's City Council meeting. A diverse cross-section of the community turned out to bear witness on a night when Stockton continued its inexorable march toward becoming the nation's largest-ever bankrupt municipality.

"What got us in this mess was a long, drawn-out process," said Stockton business owner Andre Reekie, who attended a council meeting for the first time in two years. "It's going to be a long, drawn-out process to get us out of this mess."

The mood of the audience in the packed chambers and an equally jammed lobby was a jumble of frustration, tension and anger as the council approved by a 6-1 vote the so-called "pendency plan" that will serve going forward as Stockton's bankruptcy-era budget.

In addition to the ire and the angst, powerlessness was also a prevalent emotion. Well before the City Council's vote, 25-year-old Samuel Morris of Occupy Stockton said he realized community opposition would be in vain.

"They're going to do it regardless of what people say," Morris said. "No one's getting heard here."

Many in the audience were city retirees. Some told heart-wrenching tales.

Gary Jones, a retired police officer, said he fears cuts to his health benefits will shorten his life. Jones, 52, said he has battled a brain tumor for 10 years and his retiree medical insurance has enabled him to afford the treatment he needs.

Without that level of coverage, he said, "It could cost me my life. My wife is terrified for me."

He said he is paying for others' mistakes.

"They ran the city wrong," Jones said. "They keep blaming other administrations instead of saying, 'This happened on our watch. We need to fix it.' "

Former police dispatcher Joni Anderson, who retired for medical reasons eight years ago, told a similar tale. The 45-year-old Anderson fears she and her 18-year-old daughter, Taylor, who has a serious heart condition, are about to lose their safety net.

"I'm here because I lose my medical insurance Sunday," Anderson told The Record.

She told the City Council, "That medical insurance is invaluable to me. If I could ransom myself for it, I would. The 'pendency plan' ... is a death sentence to some and to others an unavoidable slap in the face."

Homeless advocates, meanwhile, questioned city priorities in light of the stripped-down police force. The city has better uses for its limited public-safety resources, they said, than to use them to relocate those living on the streets.

Rynne Cowham of Occupy Stockton predicted a dire aftermath to the City Council's move toward bankruptcy.

The 47-year-old Cowham said she was recently asked about Stockton's situation by co-workers in Walnut Creek. She said she told them, "We expect gangland apocalypse, martial law and copious looting and rioting to follow."

Cowham added, "I was only half kidding. It's like a powder keg ready to blow."

The evening's most novel moments were provided by Jean-Jacques Vitrac, the elegantly attired owner of the Domaine Becquet Winery in Valley Springs. He presented himself to the City Council as a self-styled 11th-hour angel.

The 70-year-old Vitrac, who speaks with a thick French accent, said he had been traveling recently in Europe and knew nothing of Stockton's plight until hearing a radio report Tuesday morning.

Vitrac said he tried to contact Mayor Ann Johnston later Tuesday but was told she was too busy to speak to him. So Vitrac presented his proposed solution - whether snake oil or salvation - during the council meeting.

In his role as a business consultant, Vitrac said he could find a lender who would provide the city with a "no-risk, no-liability" loan of perhaps \$100 million.

Vitrac said acceptance of his out-of-left-field proposal would forestall bankruptcy.

"We should avoid bankruptcy at all costs," he said.

During a break, City Manager Bob Deis was asked about Vitrac's offer. "If it sounds too good to be true," Deis said, "it probably is."

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