

St. Louis Post Dispatch

June 11, 1992

JENNINGS

Recall Move Begins To Unseat Mayor

ACORN Accuses Tharp Of Violating Laws; Move A 'Personal Vendetta,' He Says

By Marcia L. Koenig
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

Members of a community action group in Jennings are circulating a petition to recall Mayor William D. Tharp.

The group is ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now. Members attended the Jennings City Council meeting Monday night and sparked an outburst after calling for Tharp to resign.

The mayor refused.

Several group members began shouting questions and comments at Tharp, who banged his gavel loudly and repeatedly for several minutes. Then the group of 15 residents walked out. Police Chief James Trentham called two officers to the council chamber, but the incident went no further.

Later in the meeting, Tharp said, "I feel there's a personal vendetta against me. They are probably sincere, but I don't agree with them."

A Jennings resident and a chairwoman of the residents' group, Kathy Steinlage, cited several instances in which the group says Tharp acted improperly. Steinlage said Tharp had:

- Violated a city ordinance that bars city employees from running for office. For about 10 years, Tharp collected a salary as the city's community development director while continuing to run and be elected as mayor.

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- Diverted \$123,000 from the city's police and firefighters pension fund to pay bills and meet the payroll. City officials say the city has since repaid the fund with money from a bank loan.

- Appropriated for his own use a Lincoln Versailles and an Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme seized in a drug case in the city.

The Post-Dispatch publicized Tharp's use of such cars in a copyrighted story last year. Tharp defended his practice, saying he was "the chief law enforcement officer" of the city.

As for the pension diversion, Tharp said he had been following advice from Treasurer George J. Bagot. But Bagot denies making any such recommendation.

Tharp's defense of his former position as a city employee and elected official was that the council appointed him community development director after he became mayor.

After Steinlage invited Tharp to resign at the meeting Monday night, an-

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other resident, Retta Morcom, spoke. "I think this war is over," she said. "Let's all fight and work together. When this is a thriving community, then everyone is going to win."

But ACORN members shouted, "Resign Mayor Tharp."

"Mayor Tharp Leave."

"Resign."

Morcom is active in a Neighborhood Watch group. She said after the meeting that she doesn't disagree with any organization — she just thinks residents and the city should work together.

Steinlage said the group planned to collect 2,500 signatures on a recall petition and to organize a voter registration drive in Jennings.

"It's our view that you can't gripe if you don't vote," Steinlage said.