

Public forum planned as part of interim Contra Costa DA search

By **SAM RICHARDS** | srichards@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group
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MARTINEZ — County supervisors want to appoint an interim district attorney by mid-September, and plan to hold a public forum in August where the public would be allowed to directly ask the finalists questions.

At a special meeting Friday morning to establish a process to replace Mark Peterson, the supervisors said that, given the list of controversies in the Contra Costa District Attorney's Office over the past several years, allowing the most transparent process possible is crucial to help the office regain its collective reputation. Having the applicants answer questions from the public, supervisors said, will not only help them make a final selection but will require the applicants to publicly say how they would try to reverse almost a decade of toxic culture in that office.

Supervisor Candace Andersen from Danville said the direct interaction between the applicants and the public is illuminating for all concerned. "I don't want to filter their comments" by having the public talk to us, and then the supervisors passing them on. "We don't need a middle man."

A tentative forum date of Aug. 15 was set, and the supervisors figure the forum would involve perhaps three to five finalists for the DA's job. The chosen one would serve out Peterson's term, which ends in January 2019.

The supervisors, and some public commenters, on Friday acknowledged the internal problems the DA's Office has had over the past five years, capped by [the June 14 resignation of District Attorney Peterson](#) hours before pleading no contest to one count of felony perjury. That came six months after the California Fair Political Practices Commission announced it had fined Peterson \$45,000 for nine separate violations of the Political Reform Act between 2011 and 2015. The county civic grand jury accused him of misconduct and recommended he step down, which he refused to do until the day he pleaded to the felony charge.

The DA's Office had been in the news in a bad way long before that. Deputy prosecutor Michael Gressett was arrested in 2008 and charged with a dozen felonies over allegations

he raped a colleague (the charges were ultimately dropped after the colleague refused to testify). In 2010, two high-ranking Contra Costa prosecutors, Paul Sequeira and Hal Jewett, got into a fist fight at work, the culmination of a heated argument. In 2012, the county paid Sequeira — who subsequently needed eye surgery — a \$50,000 settlement. And a demoted prosecutor sued over whether Peterson unfairly demoted deputies solely because they opposed his 2010 election.

Additionally, the supervisors were told Friday by Cheryl Sudduth of the Black Women Organized for Political Action that the DA's Office staff — or the justice system in general — doesn't reflect "the culture of the community." When asked by Supervisor Karen Mitchoff of Concord whether the concern was the makeup of the DA's Office or which groups are prosecuted more often, Sudduth said, "They go hand in hand."

A coalition of unions and community groups has asked the supervisors to refrain from anyone who has said they'll run for election in 2018 to the DA's post. Two people, Contra Costa senior deputy DA Paul Graves and Santa Clara County senior prosecutor Patrick Vanier, have announced intent to run.

But Andersen and Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond said you can't practically require that, and wouldn't necessarily want to.

"Frankly, I hope that 'best person' decides to run," Gioia said.