

Group demands probe of police chief, city attorney

■ Residents want investigation into officials' hiring of 'rogue cops, misfits and rejects'

By Suzanne Zalev

STAFF WRITER

EAST PALO ALTO — A group of residents is calling for an investigation of Police Chief Wes Bowling, accusing him of "cover-ups" and of hiring "rogue cops, misfits and rejects."

The six residents also have asked the District Attorney, the Civil Grand Jury and the FBI to investigate City Attorney Michael Lawson, saying his "incompetent advising" has cost the city hundreds of thousands of dollars in lawsuits.

Bowling said Tuesday he's done nothing wrong and welcomes questions from any agency that has the authority to conduct such a review.

The complaint, delivered to the Grand Jury and D.A. and on its way to the FBI, alleges that Bowling continues to hire "undesirables" who have been fired from other police departments, are facing criminal investigations or have not been able to pass exams.

"We . . . live in fear of retaliation from these officers, the very people that we pay to protect

EAST PALO ALTO

and serve us," said the complaint, signed by George Gill, Ora Colbert Johnson, William Branner, Marilu Serrano, Richard Reyes and Verda Robertson.

The complaint arrives in a thick packet that includes letters, news articles, copies of complaints and documents from lawsuits. Colbert Johnson said she's been working on it since last year.

"I just got fed up with the way that the city has been (treating) its citizens," she said.

In 2001, Johnson said, her son was wrongly accused of dealing drugs, and it took a year for the system to clear him. It wouldn't have taken that long if the Police Department had helped, she claimed.

Her son was in jail two weeks, she said, "but it was the worst two weeks of his life." He lost his job and attempted suicide, and Colbert Johnson said Bowling had "no empathy or sympathy." Instead of Bowling checking out leads that pointed to her son's innocence, she said, she had to do all the research. Her son had an alibi, she said, and there was other evidence pointing to his innocence.

During that time, Colbert Johnson said, she became good

at doing the research, and after her son was exonerated, other people came to her and asked for help with their problems.

Officers fired by other departments may have been hired before he became chief eight years ago, Bowling said. If those officers haven't done anything wrong in the time they've worked for East Palo Alto, he said he can't fire them, because he doesn't have cause. If he did fire them, he said, those employees would have grounds to sue for wrongful termination.

"We've done nothing wrong, and we continue to try to hold the standards to a very high level," Bowling said.

'Rogue' officers?

The complaint states that several officers fired by other departments were hired by Bowling. One such officer named in the complaint is Shawn Wildman — a former East Palo Alto officer who pleaded no contest several years ago to sexual battery and abuse of authority, according to Times archives.

Wildman was hired in 1998, when Bowling was chief, and fired the following year — before the end of his probationary period — after three girls accused

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Ora Colbert Johnson

ON OF SIX EAST PALO ALTO RESIDENTS SEEKING POLICE CHIEF'S OUSTER

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him of groping them during a traffic stop, according to Times stories from that time.

The complaint says that before Wildman was hired in East Palo Alto, he was fired from the San Jose Police Department for "cheating and lying."

Wildman was hired as a recruit officer in October 1997, said Sgt. Steve Dixon, public information officer for the San Jose department. He resigned in March 1998, Dixon said — right before the end of his six months in the academy.

Also hired under Bowling's watch was Lesa Stone, who will stand trial this summer on fraud charges in connection with an alleged telemarketing scam. Stone was on paid administrative leave for months after her arrest last summer, but she's currently at work performing clerical duties in the department.

Stone is innocent until

proven guilty, Bowling said, and he doesn't have cause to fire her. He said if he has to pay her while she's on administrative leave, he may as well have her working.

She was arrested after almost a year on the job, Bowling said, and nothing came up in her background check.

The complaint accuses Lawson, the city attorney, of failing to represent East Palo Alto, "resulting with our city paying out horrendous lawsuits."

Big bucks

The most recent is the wrongful-dismissal suit filed by former Sgt. Robert Cole, who said he was fired for being a whistle-blower. City officials said he was fired for insubordination. Cole was reinstated by the city's now-defunct Human Resources Commission and then twice by the courts. Last summer, the city settled with Cole for \$525,000.

In 2001, the city agreed to pay former officer Gina Garibaldi \$185,000 to settle her sexual-harassment lawsuit, according to Times archives. Garibaldi is not mentioned in the complaint letter, although newspaper articles on her are included.

Lawson, the complaint said,

"We've done nothing wrong, and we continue to try to hold the standards to a very high level."

Wes Bowling

EAST PALO ALTO CHIEF OF POLICE

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"knowingly assisted and conspired in police misconduct, cover-ups and abuse incidents with (Bowling)."

Lawson said he has not seen the complaint and has no comment.

Deputy District Attorney Steve Wagstaffe said earlier this week he's received the complaint and is looking at whether there is criminal wrongdoing that warrants the District Attorney's involvement. The office will only investigate if the problems are at the level of a crime, he said, adding that incompetence is not a crime.

FBI spokeswoman LaRae Guy and East Palo Alto Mayor Patricia Foster did not return phone calls.

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