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## **Capistrano schools again embroiled in a recall**

**New effort in southern Orange County targets four trustees who were subjects of a previous attempt.**

**By Seema Mehta, Times Staff Writer**

Critics of a southern Orange County school district launched an effort Monday to recall four longtime trustees, the latest salvo in a revolt that has besieged Capistrano Unified School District in recent years.

"You have ignored the ever-growing chorus of elected officials and voters calling for your immediate resignations. And as a result, you now leave the voters with no choice but to remove you from office now," Tom Russell, spokesman for the CUSD Recall Committee, said at the school board meeting Monday.

The recall effort is aimed at trustees Sheila Benecke, Mike Darnold, Marlene Draper and Duane Stiff. They showed no emotion as four women walked to the dais and handed each a formal notice of the intent to circulate recall petitions.

"You have permitted a culture of corruption to infect our school district.... You grossly mismanaged district finances," the notices read in part. "You have broken the public's trust."

Although many of Capistrano Unified's 56 schools are among the state's best, the 50,000-student district's school board and administrators have been beset by a string of controversies, including the felony indictments in May of former Supt. James A. Fleming and former Assistant Supt. Susan McGill over the creation of a political enemies list of district critics.

The district also has faced disputes over attendance boundaries, a new high school's location, aging portable classrooms and a costly new administration center. Critics have also alleged that the school board routinely violated the state's open-meeting law.

The CUSD Recall Committee tried to recall those four trustees and three others in 2005 but didn't get enough signatures to qualify for the ballot. But that was a singular loss for the group of parents, community members and others. They succeeded in placing three new trustees on the school board in the November election, and their efforts, in part, prompted the resignation

of Fleming last summer and the indictments of Fleming and McGill in May.

Darnold called the recall effort unfortunate. "It's just a waste of time and energy. I was elected to serve, and I'm serving until I'm voted out," Darnold said. "It's just disappointing that the teachers and parents and students and administrators of the school district have to go through the pain of this effort again.... We have an awesome school district."

Stiff declined to comment Monday. Attempts to reach Benecke and Draper were unsuccessful.

Once the notices are filed with the county registrar of voters, the trustees have seven days to file a response. Then proponents can draft petitions. Once the registrar rules that the petitions adhere to state election law, proponents have 160 days to gather at least 20,000 voter signatures per trustee, Russell said. They hope to begin gathering signatures within a month.

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