

California Journal How Facebook posts led to the ouster of the conservative mayor of a liberal Bay Area town



At home Sunday, Jeff Wieler, the former mayor of Piedmont, a ritzy residential city in the Oakland Hills, talked about the events that led to his resignation from the Piedmont City Council. His conservative social media posts caused a citywide revolt. (Robin Abcarian / Los Angeles Times)

By **Robin Abcarian**

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After a few days of thought, Jeff Wieler decided to invite me over to his hillside home. I could understand his reluctance.

The last few weeks have not been pleasant for Wieler, who was forced to step down as mayor of Piedmont, a charming and affluent city nestled in the Oakland Hills. He was not particularly eager to meet with a journalist. But he also wanted a chance to explain himself.

A couple of weeks ago, what seemed to be a routine Facebook argument over whether [President Trump](#) had properly condemned the neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, Va., mushroomed into a townwide controversy that led to sharp words, revelations about disparaging or vulgar social media posts and the end of his tenure as a city official.

A registered Republican in an overwhelmingly Democratic city, Wieler, 66, believes he has been unfairly pilloried for posting what he considers provocative articles from a variety of mostly conservative publications:

“Black Lives Matter encourages cop killing.”

“The Left is dangerous and un-American.”

“Transgenders are mentally ill.”

“Now and then I would see an article, something that really gave an interesting point of view,” he told me. “The Atlantic, or Salon or National Review. All kinds of places. I would post it and say ‘interesting perspective’ or ‘good points’ or ‘worth reading.’”

You can imagine how those headlines went over with his fellow Piedmonters.

Things blew up after Conna McCarthy, a community activist, tangled with Wieler over Charlottesville. After a back-and-forth on Facebook about whether Trump was forceful enough in his condemnation, McCarthy suggested that Wieler open the Aug. 21 council meeting with a moment of silence for the victims of Charlottesville.

He accused McCarthy, daughter of the late Democratic California Lt. Gov. Leo McCarthy, of being a “lurid partisan” and said, “The only moment of silence you will get is when I stop engaging with you.” His cranky words set off the citizen revolt that led to his resignation. (He *did* end up starting the meeting with a moment of silence after Councilwoman Teddy Gray King put it on the council’s agenda.)

Then someone unearthed a recent post about Hillary Clinton on the social media site Quora. “Having a vagina,” Wieler wrote, “is not a vision that inspires. And before some feminist harpy objects to the last sentence, let me say that I dearly love vaginas.”

“I feel bad for him,” said McCarthy, when we spoke Monday. “His thoughts are free speech. But when you see that he sits on different governmental committees — with folks from Oakland and Berkeley — and he’s representing our town? That is not a good look for

us. Our children are suspended from school for saying the things our mayor has said publicly.”

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On Sunday evening, Wieler opened his front door and ushered me into his well-appointed living room. He sat next to a white marble fireplace in a red leather wingback chair. A couple of times over two hours, he removed and replaced a brace on his left arm. Seven years ago, a stroke left him with a clenched left hand, and it still causes him discomfort.

Wieler was engaging and funny. Although he penned [a letter of apology](#) to Piedmont when he resigned, he was still wrestling emotionally with events of the last few weeks.

A graduate of Princeton and Harvard Business School, Wieler recounted a career that took him around the country to companies as varied as Sara Lee and Loomis Armored. He also had a disastrous stint importing invisible zippers from China before ending up as chief financial officer and assistant head of school for Redwood Day, a private school in Oakland. He retired in 2010.

One detail that surprised me: In the late 1980s, before he married his wife, Jean, he spent several months at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, a spiritual mecca for seekers around the world. He went there, he said, to recharge his batteries and try to figure out what he wanted out of life.

“Esalen is the most brilliant piece of management I’ve ever seen,” Wieler said. “They have a work-scholar program. They have a farm, a garden, rooms, laundry, a kitchen, which need workers. So you pay *them* to let you work.”

Turned out what he wanted was to be paid for his labor, so he returned to corporate life.

It grew dark outside as we talked. I could tell he was angry and hurt that his days as a Piedmont official had come to such an ignominious end. Even the Piedmont Post, a staunch Wieler ally that had inexplicably ignored the mounting controversy, turned on him after a barrage of criticism from readers.

“It’s been brutal,” Wieler said. “I’m not a saint. I know I can be blunt. But I spent 25 years trying to improve this town and I think I did a damn good job. But if I am the center of a firestorm, and a majority of the City Council decides to have a special meeting to discuss removing me as mayor, I don’t want to put the city through this.”

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Last week, after accepting Wieler's resignation, the Piedmont City Council installed a new mayor, Councilman Bob McBain. Wieler told me that McBain, a friend, was "instrumental" in persuading him to step down, not just from the ceremonial mayoral post, but from the City Council entirely.

When I first read about Wieler's downfall, I assumed it was a case of political correctness run amok, of an ultra-liberal town rising up against a conservative contrarian for daring to go against the political grain.

There was some of that. But that's not the whole story.

Wieler deeply offended his constituents, dozens of whom turned out to the Aug. 21 meeting to register their displeasure with his social media posts and tone. Jessica Berg, who grew up in Piedmont and moved back to raise her children, seemed to sum up the feelings of many when she said that "the comments from our mayor undo the good work people are doing."

It takes a certain temperament to be a successful city leader, even in a tiny place like Piedmont. A mayor has to be in tune with his town. Wieler, sadly, was way off key.

"There is some tragedy there," McCarthy said. "You can't be angry at him. But at the same time it wasn't possible for him to stay in that elected position. He just didn't fit in."

By stepping down without a fight, Wieler did the right thing for the city he loves. I asked him what he planned to do with the 15 or 20 hours a week he once spent on town business. He said he'd spend more time in physical therapy for his arm, and try to figure out a way to be useful to Piedmont.

"And gripe," he said with a smile. "To my wife."

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UPDATES:

8:20 a.m.: This article was updated with an explanation that the mayoral post is ceremonial.

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