

New rules threaten hoedowns



Johanna Coyne/Staff photographer

Members of Senior Squares square dance at the Visalia Senior Center to Rick Hampton, their caller. Senior Squares is a club that has used the Visalia Senior Center for 15 years and suddenly has to adhere to new city regulations or lose their dance hall, and even dance caller.

Dancers, city square off

By Gerald Carroll
Staff writer

A Visalia square-dance group called the Senior Squares is afraid the city of Visalia may be calling its last do-si-do.

The square dancers say they are faced with new charges for using the Visalia Senior Center and, worse, restrictions on the way they pay their square-dance callers.

The city says it's merely trying to protect itself and the Senior Center, which it operates, along with the people who use it, including the Senior Squares, who have danced there for 15 years.

Terry Romero, a recreation supervisor who has been in charge of the Senior Center at 310 N. Locust St. for the past year, contends that

the Senior Squares' two-hour sessions every Friday have grown into full-blown events that require more formal registration and cost management.

"A lot of activities take place here [at the center]," Romero said. "There has to be some accountability."

The city wants the dancers to sign liability waivers and pay \$2 a person each week. In addition, the city wants to end the practice of dancers taking up a collection to pay the square-dance callers cash that's pocketed without any taxes withheld. It wants them either to be unpaid volunteers or to become part-time city employees.

Another alternative, said Vince Elizondo, director of Visalia's Parks and Recreation Department, which

administers the Senior Center, is for the square-dance caller to rent space at a negotiable \$10-\$25 an hour and work out a payment with the Senior Squares.

The dancers say the Senior Squares and other groups have used the center without charge for 15 years.

"The center is changing and not for the better," stated a letter to the Times-Delta signed by 19 other members of the Senior Squares.

The city, the letter states, wants to charge the Senior Squares for use of the center and has already ordered all the groups' members to sign liability waivers.

"Most all the members have signed [waivers]," one of the dancers, Tino Montoya, said. "Only one wants to discuss it with their



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From left, Patti Howard, Dan Swassing, Reba and Tino Montoya square dance at the Visalia Senior Center.

daughter first."

But the dispute has hit at the heart of any square dance — the callers, the singer-chanters who lay down the steps for each number.

"I normally charge \$250 or more for this type of service," said Norman Crenshaw, a longtime caller who has

more recently been sidelined by a leg amputation.

Rick Boswell of Tehachapi and Rick Hampton of Visalia are the alternate callers.

"I might get \$35, \$40 at the most from donations" at the Senior Squares events, Crenshaw said. "I've done this for

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