

January 16, 2024

To the Attention of:
The Honorable Mayor Joe Meek and City Council
City of Crystal River

RE: Letter of Concern

I am writing to you to because of my growing concerns regarding recent developments that are having an effect on the daily operations of the Growth Management Department. More particularly, I am troubled about some of the expectations of the City Manager and Assistant City Manager regarding changes to the Department's daily functions and staff demands. While Mr. Baber may be well intended, his "make-it-happen-now at whatever cost" management style is unlike any I have experienced in my 35+ years in local government. Frankly, it's exhausting and creating chaos in the Department's processes.

Of grave concern are the abnormalities I am experiencing in the movement of monies from the Department's budget without explanation or my prior knowledge. For example, it came to my attention that the city manager with no explanation called for moving certain budget line items related to professional education to the Assistant City Manager's budget. This is concerning because the Department uses these funds to provide educational opportunities for staff to keep updated on the city's statutory obligations and to maintain professional accreditation for our various employees that must serve as experts in providing testimony and providing various city services (e.g. code enforcement, business tax receipt maintenance, comprehensive planning, etc.). I consider myself a prudent keeper of the Department's budget, and these funds have been carefully considered in comparison to what it would cost the city to hire outside professional consultants to provide these services. More importantly, I find it very disconcerting when changes are made to line items in a Department's budget without the department director's input.

Of equal concern is the city manager's demand for pursuing new city projects that are unbudgeted, and with unreasonable deadline expectations. The recent hiring of a new third party, building services contractor (EPCI), resulted in Mr. Baber's change of the city's permit database to a "cloud based" system to allow the contractor to remotely access the database. The call to go totally paperless for permit submittals is worthy of consideration, but unfortunately, the new system was executed without any trial period. Staff is being trained on the fly while using the cloud based system, and it has become increasing difficult to track permit applications resulting in a very irritated public. Hence, this has brought about an increase in customer phone calls and emails to the frustration of staff that is just trying to keep up with data entry, routing for plan review, billing, and scheduling inspections.

Reporting periods have increased, demands for immediate responses, and the numerous calls for meetings are resulting in loss of productivity in day-to-day operations and diminished work quality. Mr. Baber told us at one of his staff meetings that if we can't keep up, we don't need to be working for the city. I find that the work demand has made it increasingly difficult to stay focused on the completion of existing projects, and at this time I am considering leaving the employment of the city. I truly love working for the city. I pride myself in being a well-organized, responsive manager, but the expected pace is overwhelming. I am starting to see an increase in internal complaints and employee stress, raising concern for staff's well-being and the potential loss of tenured personnel that could put the city's continuity of operations at risk.

I feel I would be remiss if I did not bring these concerns to your attention.

Sincerely,



Jenette Collins, AICP
Growth Management Director
City of Crystal River