

To: Mayor and Council Members
Through: City Attorney Batsel
From: City Clerk Mia Fink
Date: January 14, 2024

RE: Management Concerns

As difficult as this may be, there is an urgent need to inform Council of the current state of affairs and the direction in which the city is being taken by current management (City Manager and Assistant City Manager). Please accept this letter as a desperate request for assistance, as I find myself and the entire team of directors in a dire situation and we hope to save the organization from further damage.

The increasingly toxic work environment coupled with the heavy-handed, politically clumsy approach to navigating relationships with community members has made carrying out daily operations more challenging than ever. This, along with some alarming signs of ethical issues, are putting the city at potential risk for a plethora of damaging outcomes.

I had hoped things would return to some semblance of normalcy once we were past the phase of post-storm crisis management, with the frantic pace slowing just a bit. However, as months have passed, it has become clear that the approach to leadership that the current City Manager and Assistant City Manager have taken with staff and other community leaders, stakeholders, etc. is not a result of the storm and subsequent displacement. I have watched helplessly as many of the bridges built by our former City Manager and Assistant City Manager have been damaged with reckless abandon; decisions are often emotionally driven, typically out of anger, when the CM does not get his way. The community partnerships that have helped the city to thrive have been completely disregarded. In one staff meeting the Asst CM announced that “we are about to piss off the county, haha!” Also, the CM has made pointed statements regarding “starting a police department” on several occasions in the presence of CCSO staff.

The tone is set from the top, and the current tone is one of fear and intimidation... this tone has permeated through the organization to the very base of the structure and the cracks are showing more and more each day, as we are losing key staff members that have added much value to the organization through years of experience and expertise. An organization’s strength is derived from the staff members, an invaluable resource... if the status quo is allowed to continue, the city will inevitably lose more staff members. I have attempted to prevent some of the unnecessary battles being fought... by providing insight and historical background to create a greater sense of understanding, which have been ignored. The once open door policy held by prior management has been replaced by a door that remains closed, with the City Manager and Assistant City Manager closed tightly behind it, firing off directives and demands via text message and email.

Many of us have been subjected to verbal and nonverbal aggression, belittling, and demeaning comments, both directly to and about other staff members. They continue to set unrealistic expectations and employ fear tactics to maintain control. Rather than empowering and nurturing staff, they exert power through the use of threatening and intimidating behavior and language. The current management team (CM and ASST CM) seems to lack the emotional maturity and capacity to effectively run the city. Morale among staff members is on a rapid decline. The conditions have been damaging to both the emotional and mental health of the staff, who were already under duress from the stress of dealing with leadership transitions and storm-related crisis management.

We have been told as a group that conditions will not improve, but “only get harder” as the expected level of productivity will continue to increase and the pace will continue to accelerate. We are told that anyone who cannot handle this path should “leave now” or “get off the ride”. We have been told to communicate directly any concerns but when those concerns are communicated they are rebuffed and additional targeted tasking and demands are applied as a resulting “punishment” or consequence. We have also been spoken to about “confidentiality”... and have been told to cease any direct communications with Council members or legal staff without management being copied (if in writing) or privy to, if verbal, with the possibility of retribution... communicated just vaguely enough by saying it will reflect poorly on us.

The level of hostility and dissatisfaction directed at staff is ever increasing. The narcissist’s tactic of gas lighting is also being used to control staff. We have been told how to think about things that have been disturbing... in a way does not match reality but one that validates their version of “reality” that they are attempting to establish. “Don’t think about it this way... think about it that way”. In this new “reality” we are under their complete and constant control, even during our personal time. Anyone who is out sick or on vacation is still expected to respond to tasking and demands that arise during that time. There are no boundaries or respect for anyone’s personal time. They are lacking in empathy or care for any personal needs of the staff... or members of the community for that matter. The lengths they have gone to gaslight, manipulate and establish a culture of fear and intimidation are beyond unprofessional, and often times just cruel.

I suspected there would be problems when the first person targeted was the HR director... who was berated and belittled in front of other staff members for letting CM know that there was not enough to complete a task by a certain date and time. This was done to instill fear and establish control over the only person City staff could come to with their concerns regarding the workplace.

After I was ordered to re-establish video streaming of council meetings ASAP... I worked with our IT provider and AV Tech to deliver a solution. For the sound to work, I have to create a zoom meeting on one laptop and invite an attendee through another laptop that has the camera plugged in... when an explanation was demanded and I provided such... I was told “I’m not buying it!” I actually had to have IT verify that my explanation was truthful and accurate.

One morning following a Council briefing on the agenda, the CM stormed into the office with the agenda book and an agenda memo that listed an incorrect council member name (in recommended action field). He shows me the typo, opens up his binder to that item and aggressively rips the page out and drips the pages on my desk as I’m told to “fix it, now”... he was angry and embarrassed that a council member found a typo in the agenda.

Myself and my Deputy Clerk have also been delegated the task of clerking (and ordered to begin streaming) PC meetings... because CM and ASST CM wished to appear more “professional”. Drowning in the endless stream of tasks (often times arbitrary), I brought my concerns to CM... regarding the difficulty we were having in keeping up with the increased workload, many of which are items previously handled by Planning staff... I was told that the Planning Department “brings in the most revenue”. Extremely irrelevant and unfair, since my position is not one that centers on generating revenues for the city, but largely centers on facilitating public accessibility to information.

There have also been ethical concerns raised by some of the requests being made. These center around eliminating the need for Council approval for contracts and agreements. I was asked multiple times to

draft a resolution that would provide blanket authorization for the CM to enter into any agreement on behalf of the city without going to council for approval. Even after explaining why that would not be legally possible I still had to request Legal staff to verify this and provide an explanation. He even demanded the Finance Director provide full access to all city financial accounts by a certain day and time, or risk the possibility of being written up.

During past discussions regarding procurement, CM and Asst CM were informed on the process and the need for public selection committee meetings, during which the scores were announced and proposals formally ranked. Following the closing of the Disaster Management Services proposal acceptance period, the bids were opened by the Deputy Clerk, as I was out that day. Also, the Asst CM was communicating directly with the Deputy Clerk regarding this particular bid opening. When I later asked about the scheduling and noticing of the subsequent selection committee meeting, I was told that the Asst CM did not think we needed to have one. I advised that a confirmation from Legal should be received prior to moving forward without that. I was subsequently directed to place the item awarding the contract on the November agenda, as a FEMA deadline was fast approaching. Immediately before the meeting began, I was asked to join CM outside the temporary chamber, along with Councilmember Frink and City Attorney Batsel, who'd inquired if the selection committee portion of the process had been followed. CM confirmed it had, noting that I had conducted the bid opening and asking me to confirm and validate. I could not and the item was pulled and brought back at the following meeting. The bid opening was not the step in the process being questioned and in that moment, I did not clarify that it was my Deputy Clerk that handled the bid opening in my absence, contrary to CM's claim, out of fear for myself and my coworker. We subsequently conducted the selection committee meeting, the firms were ranked, and the contract awarded at the following meeting, though comments were made during the agenda process, with CM asking me if "I was ok with" moving forward with the item, and was I sure.

There is also been a growing obsession with "controlling the narrative" by requiring one staff member to write all journalistic material, which then get submitted to the Chronicle for publication. Both the CM and ASST CM constantly talk about the critical need to control the narrative and when I explain that we've always had a decent relationship with the Chronicle and they've always been capable of writing articles that reflect well on the city CM insists that it is necessary to ensure they are focusing on what he wants them to focus on. Based on historical data, a propaganda machine is a red flag for some serious underlying issues... and I a tactic often used by dictatorial regimes. It does not reflect well on the city. Accuracy is important but actions are what truly drive a narrative.

We are all professionals, experts in our respective fields and adults, having earned our positions through our merits. Making sacrifices in the best interest of the city, but we are being treated as inferiors, lacking in expertise or value.

They don't seem to value people for who they are but will objectify them to extract things they want at that moment. Once they get what they want from one person, they ignore them and go on to the next person.

I have personally witnessed management belittle and degrade staff members, in the presence of other staff members... one is a complete bully and narcissist, the other exhibits a cold, calculating disregard for the human element. Everyday we make a choice to return to work and continue to carry out our duties in spite of these abhorrent conditions... out of love for the city. I implore you to take action before the organization suffers any further damage. If Council could take actions necessary to protect

remaining staff and remnants of community partnerships...it can be assured that continuity of operations would rest safe in the hands of those who have been carrying out their duties throughout this most challenging of times... until such a time when an appropriate leader is put into place.