

An open letter to the Citizens and Staff of the City of Rhinelander

There have been many rumors and assumptions about what happened behind the closed doors of the Executive Meeting Room on Monday, August 29, 2016 which resulted in the termination of Kristina Aschenbrenner. In an attempt to bring forth the truth as to what happened behind those closed doors, and since Wisconsin Law states that closed session information becomes public "whenever final action has been taken or the reason for the closed session has ended" we feel as though we are not only free to make this statement, but have an obligation to do so. We have also attached copies of our completed "City Administrator Performance Review" showing our general beliefs about Kristina's performance over the last year and encourage all other council members do the same in order to bring some transparency as well as some explanation for the action taken.

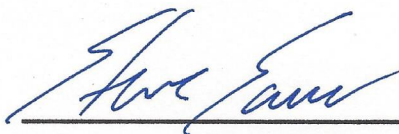
Walking into Monday's meeting we were planning on doing a performance evaluation, as we have been preparing for this process for months. Formats for the review were discussed and approved, we discussed the process to be followed, scheduled and set the agenda for this special meeting for that expressed purpose. Unfortunately, it seemed as though this was not the true intension of everyone in the room as some of the Council members announced that they had either chosen not to complete or determined their own method for the performance review, which had been unanimously approved at the August 8 meeting of the full City Council. Regardless of this, the Council proceeded to spend the next hour discussing a summary of everyone's reviews, their thoughts and concerns with respect to Kristina's performance. It appeared as though the majority of the concerns stated related to rumor, conjecture and personal opinion as opposed to the formal job description set forth in City Ordinance or recommendations and goals set forth at the May 31st meeting. At this point discussion abruptly shifted to termination, and any mention of corrective action or getting some sort of response from Kristina was met with scornful rebuttal. This is the point at which, in our opinion, it seemed as though termination was a preconceived notion and several members of the Council had decided upon this course of action long before the meeting was called to order.

After some settlement and legal discussion, Kristina was brought in to the closed session and told she was being given two options, resign or be terminated. She was never given a reason, an explanation or any justification (other than "the council has decided to go in a new direction"); nor was she given an opportunity to defend herself or state a case for her continued employment. After taking a moment to call her husband and compose herself Kristina returned to the room, sat down and asked for 24 hours to weigh her options and make her decision. She was flatly told no, and that a decision must be made immediately. At that point she announced that she was not going to resign, so the Council voted to leave closed session, made the motion to terminate and voted in open session.

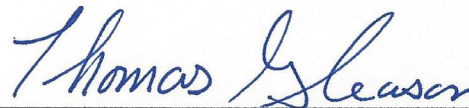
After leaving that meeting, having listened to all discussion and arguments, neither of us know of the "reason" for this termination, since none of the concerns discussed were given with any supporting evidence, proof of factual standing or an opportunity for explanation.

While it is true that Kristina's position as City Administrator is "at will" per contract, and the council did have the right to remove her at any time with a majority vote, that is not the issue here. The issues we are facing are related to procedure and morale. Procedure for disciplinary action against every city employee is determined by the "City of Rhinelander Personnel Policies and Employee Manual" under Appendix C-Disciplinary Procedures Policy which was approved by this council on February 8, 2016. The policy states that with the exception of "Unacceptable Activities" (theft, falsification of records, doing bodily harm, etc.), a 4 step process is recommended for dealing with "unsatisfactory behavior". These steps are: Oral Counseling, Written Warning, Suspension and Dismissal. Per the policy, "all pertinent facts will be carefully reviewed, and the employee will be given an opportunity to explain his or her conduct before any decision is reached." Secondly, and most importantly is the issue of morale. Rhinelander has an extremely dedicated group of department heads and staff under their supervision, and the Council has always stood by the fact that we take care of our employees. We pay a good wage and provide a great benefits package knowing that a happy, healthy and content staff will generate a loyal and long term commitment to the city long into the future. What message does it send to this staff when the Council is willing to terminate any staff member, regardless of their position, with no warning, no explanation and no opportunity to respond? This action evoked a great amount of fear and concern as to the security of any job in the city, and any attempt the Council would make to reassure City staff cannot be taken with any level of legitimacy based upon recent decisions.

In conclusion, we would like to touch on the "new direction" that is being used as the majority's reason for the termination. One year ago the Council chose to hire Kristina Aschenbrenner as the new City Administrator. We did this even though she had no experience in city administration, because she would come in fresh, with new and innovative ideas and without any preconceived notions about the position or direction of the city. We were moving forward in a new direction, and decided to abruptly stop! Our only hope that this latest "new direction" is not backwards.



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City of Rhinelander



Thomas Gleason
District 8 Alderman
City of Rhinelander