

7-10-2023
CAucus

To the City of Rome:

For the first time in the history of the Rome City Commission, a commissioner has been investigated in regard to an ethics violation. Rome City Commissioner Mark Cochran was accused of violating the ethics code for his outbursts on January 23, 2023, during a Rome City Commission meeting concerning the City of Rome Engineering staff. Commissioner Cochran chose to obtain his own legal counsel in this investigation and is now asking the Rome City Commission to pay his legal fees. Commissioners Jamie Doss, Craig McDaniel, Jim Bojo and Randy Quick do not agree with this reimbursement.

The Rome City Commission has always strived to maintain a positive and respectful working relationship with the City Manager, Sammy Rich, and all city employees. These employees are the ones who run the city so successfully and are our most valuable resource.

Here is some background information regarding this investigation:

On January 27, 2023, Mayor Sundai Stevenson solely met with city employees who shared with her their anger and frustration at the treatment many of them have received in dealing with Commissioner Cochran. During this meeting, city employees were assured by Mayor Stevenson that the matter would be taken care of and that they did not need to worry about this behavior moving forward.

On February 1, 2023, Mayor Stevenson met with former Mayors Jamie Doss, Bill Collins and Craig McDaniel and City Manager Sammy Rich to discuss the issue. Mayor Stevenson and the City Manager stated that the city had engaged Attorney David Archer to do a thorough investigation of the allegations. Mayor Stevenson also stated that Commissioner Cochran would be removed from any committees he served on in which he would directly interact with city employees. Mayor Stevenson asked that she, Collins, and Doss meet with Cochran to discuss the issue and assured the group that she would inform each of the participants of the outcome of that meeting.

On February 6, 2023, Attorney Archer began his investigation. On March 20, 2023, city commissioners were given a report stating that "no written complaint had been made and that only questions had been raised." On March 26, 2023, City of Rome Human Resource Director Kristy Shepard submitted a written ethics complaint against Cochran.

On April 10, 2023, the city engaged Attorney Chris Balch to represent the city due to the concern that City Attorney Andy Davis would be called as a witness in the investigation. Also, on this date, Mayor Stevenson and Commissioners Bill Collins and Bonny Askew went into a closed-door meeting with attorneys Frank Beacham and Andy Davis and City Manager Sammy Rich. That meeting lasted until 5:40 p.m. The scheduled caucus meeting was to begin at 5:00 p.m. The other six commissioners, city staff, and guests were left waiting while this meeting took place without any explanation. When those attending the meeting entered the Sam King Room, Mayor Stevenson stated that they had been discussing a personnel matter. This discussion, if it involved personnel, should have been conducted in executive session with all commissioners present. Who was being discussed was not revealed.

On May 2, 2023, an ethics panel evidentiary hearing was held at Rome City Hall. The panel consisted of Bremen Mayor Sharon Sewell, Adairsville Mayor Kenneth Carson and Summerville Mayor Harry Harvey. During this period, Commissioner Collins had a conversation with one of

the members of the ethics panel, Mayor Carson. Mayor Carson felt that Commissioner Collins was interfering with the investigation and informed Attorney Chris Balch of the conversation. In an article in the Rome News Tribune on May 2, 2023, Mayor Carson is quoted as saying "the case was pretty much cut and dried" and that Cochran had violated the ethics code for his outbursts on January 23, 2023.

On May 22, 2023, the Rome City Commission met in caucus to hear an update from Attorney Chris Balch. Mr. Balch asked Commissioner Collins to leave the meeting due to his perceived interference with the investigation based on his conversation with Mayor Carson on May 2, 2023. Commissioner Collins refused to leave the room and stated that his conversation with Mayor Carson had nothing to do with the investigation. Attorney Balch advised Mayor Stevenson that she had the power to ask Commissioner Collins to leave the meeting due to his apparent conflict of interest in the matter. Mayor Stevenson refused to ask Commissioner Collins to leave. The commissioners went into executive session to discuss the Cochran investigation. No action was taken.

On June 6, 2023, Rome City Commissioners received an email from Attorney Balch with a demand from Commissioner Cochran's attorney, asking if commissioners would be willing to dismiss the ethics case and pay Cochran's attorney fees. In return, Cochran would "make whatever apology he deems appropriate".

We feel that accepting this demand would compromise our integrity and our commitment to the citizens of Rome. Furthermore, much of what has occurred in this incident has not been aligned with the transparency required in ethical open meetings. Not all commissioners have been included in the process at all times.

In addition to not reimbursing Commissioner Cochran for his legal fees, we are asking that the Ethics Committee investigation continue. We will abide by the findings and recommendations of the Ethics Committee.

This incident has not been good for our community. Everyone involved would like to put this matter to rest. However, accepting the terms of this compromise would not have a positive effect on the City of Rome. As Commissioners, we need to support the employees who make this city what it is. We need to support our city manager and respect the professionalism that city employees exhibit every day.

James Dow
Craig H. Daniel
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