

Ashley Austin

Subject:

RE: Regarding my email

I appreciate the opportunity to be interviewed by attorney Pota Papakos of Allen Norton & Blue on Friday, October 2, 2026. The current investigation is into my concerns per the September 22 email and as I understood it from Ms. Papakos. An individual, especially a former law enforcement officer, making a statement perceived as threatening would reasonably cause any person to feel fearful. Because the prior four (4) complaints in May 2026 containing serious allegations were not given the same level of attention, diligence, or investigative rigor, I feel this October 2026 investigation is an attempt to intimidate me and undermine my fears. Further, the findings of previous investigations were not taken seriously or followed through which has led me to lose faith and confidence in the City's investigative process. Although I remain concerned about the current investigation, I will nevertheless cooperate and participate as required in fulfillment of my duties as a City employee.

I have yet to receive the list of questions as requested from the impromptu interrogation conducted by Mayor Short and Randy Maxon, City Treasurer, on Friday, September 25, 2026 shortly after 2pm. Those questions appeared to be focused on identifying who may have disclosed information rather than addressing my concerns outlined in the September 22 email below. This was further evidenced by the Mayor's statements to The Sun in the September 28, 2026 article that there could be consequences if the city can determine who provided The Sun with the documents referenced in the September 22 email and that he had the ability to provide a safe, non-hostile, and non-retaliatory environment. Please send the September 25 questions as soon as possible.

Ryan LaRowe's threat was made in response to reading four (4) employee complaints attached in an earlier September 22 email in which his wife and HR Director/City Clerk/Appointed City Administrator Amber LaRowe, his friends at BigSur, and his superior Code Manager Tom Collins were the subjects. This threat was overheard by several employees though some of which were not interviewed. The threat that employees who reported concerns are "[explicative] lucky" that he works in a separate building reasonably raises questions about why that distinction matters and what employees are supposed to understand from the threat. Why am I "[explicative] lucky" that he works in a different building? What is the intended meaning of that threat? How would a reasonable employee under the circumstances be expected to interpret it? Amber was overheard earlier that same day leaving the Annex building at 307 Pine Avenue after discussing the complaints with Tom and Ryan referencing "enemies". Am I now an "enemy"? It's reasonable for an employee to question whether the reference to "enemies" relates to those who filed complaints against her. Based on the nature of the allegations against her contained in the May complaints, it's reasonable for an employee to fear that Amber would retaliate against her "enemies". Is she plotting against her "enemies" with her husband after hours? This thought keeps me up at night. Ryan's superior, Tom Collins, introduced him as his "second in command". Both Ryan and Tom are former law enforcement officers. There is an inherent "brotherhood" within their field and a duty to protect one another and those they are "loyal" to.

Given the circumstances, the relationships, and the professional backgrounds, my concern is about whether employees, or even members of the public, can reasonably expect to be protected from retaliation. I recall when Tom proudly cited his "duty to protect" and "loyalty to the mayor" as reasons he threatened a local cabana business owner for what he perceived as criticism of the Mayor on Facebook. Following this incident, these business owners notified the Commission of the threat at a public meeting. After that, Tom made edits to the Cabana ordinance for the stated purpose of excluding this business from being able to operate in the City. If these are the lengths Tom will go to "protect the City", how far will Ryan go to protect his wife, his friends, and superior? If Ryan is watching his superior and wife avoid consequences for their actions, what message is this sending him?

My concerns are not based solely on Ryan's threat. They arise from a broader pattern of reporting in which employees have raised concerns, those concerns were not fully investigated or followed through, and employees who have reported them subsequently experienced adverse treatment and are left feeling unprotected.

When I approached Mayor Mark Short along with several other employees initially in April of 2026, we stated that we had concerns that we would like to address with an attorney. We also requested that the investigation be handled by someone other than attorney Matt Stephany and from a different firm than Allen Norton Blue where Matt Stephany was employed as we were aware of a relationship between Mr. Stephany and Amber. Although not disclosed to me, I later found out by my own accord that attorney Pota Papakos is employed by Allen Norton & Blue. After we followed up on our request to speak to an attorney, Mayor Short requested that we document our concerns in writing so he "had something to give [the attorney]". We were hesitant to provide the complaints in writing as we were fearful of the Mayor's close relationship with Amber LaRowe and even more fearful of her retaliating. We anticipated sharing the context and details in an interview conducted by an independent and impartial professional however, we were not afforded that opportunity. Concerns persist today despite being told that all of the complaints had been "handled".

Here is a summary of concerns:

- Tom Collins threatened a cabana business owner shortly after becoming Code Manager in late February/early March 2026. Husband and wife, owners of the cabana business, came to the March 26, 2026 Commission meeting to inform Commissioners about the threat. They were assured by the Mayor and the Commission that the matter would be fully investigated. Yet, I am not aware of any such investigation to date. (3/26/26 Audio)
- I invited Tom Collins and a member of MCSO to an April 15, 2026 P&Z meeting to discuss visibility at intersections. Later that day I reported Tom's aggressive conduct toward the P&Z Chair to Mayor Short which made at least several people in the room extremely uncomfortable. Mayor Short advised that the MCSO member had expressed the same concern immediately following the meeting. (4/15/26 Audio)
- In May of 2026, employees submitted written formal complaints containing allegations of harassment by Tom. Several employees had personally witnessed relevant conduct on separate occasions, yet not all of those employees were interviewed by investigating attorney Garret Olsen of Vose Law Firm.
- I was informed by Garret Olsen that he did not even receive a copy of my complaint and had no knowledge of the other complaints. This raises a serious question about whether the investigator had access to the full scope of the information necessary to conduct a complete investigation.
- Tom returned after paid administrative leave mid-June despite the investigating attorney identifying material findings. Within 60-days of Tom's return:
 - On August 14, Tom interrupts a work-related discussion between him and I to aggressively confront another female employee stating, "we need to talk about you not responding to my texts". This is one of the exact behaviors that prompted and was identified in the May complaints.
 - On August 14, Tom is overheard by another employee asking a female employee out for drinks after work. Another behavior that prompted and was identified in the May complaints.
 - On another occasion within 60-days of Tom's return, Tom is overheard telling a female employee, "I would hug you but that would be considered sexual harassment".

- Documentation establishing that Tom completed the harassment training course that was a condition of his return to work has not been produced. Rather, an overly broad letter signed by Mayor Short and dated August 20, 2026 states that Tom had “satisfied the requirements applicable to the 60-day review period and no further corrective action is required at this time”.
- A sitting Commissioner commented in June 2026 on a Facebook post publicly minimizing the conduct that was found to have material findings stating “people have mistook friendliness of a touchy feely person for a sexual come on”.
- There were no findings or proof of any investigation into the nepotism concerns. Yet, Ryan LaRowe continued to receive preferential treatment including
 - working overtime approved by his superior and wife when other employees in the same department were refused 0.04 OT
 - his wife “vouched for him” when he forgot to clock-in while another employee received a write-up for the same action
 - failing to report FEMA violations during inspections despite that being the purpose of the creation of the Vacation Rental Program Manager position
- Complaints alleged Amber was speaking disparagingly about another employee with a disability. According to the City’s Employee Handbook, the statements made by Amber meet the definition of “Prohibited Improper Harassment” which under Section III, “will not be tolerated”. None of the witnesses to these statements received interviews. However, investigation findings signed and dated by Mayor Short on June 17, 2026, found that Amber “had commented on the performance of other employees who were not under her direct supervision which was overheard by other individuals in the office”. Who investigated and produced these findings? Were they given a copy of the May complaints?
- Those that have complained have received a demotion, decrease in pay, removal of duties, decrease in authority, change in reporting structure, isolation and exclusion, different treatment, increased scrutiny, placed under the supervision of the subject of employee complaints, negative reviews, etc.
- One or more of the subjects of the complaints were subsequently promoted and/or given expanded authority.
- Amber, as City Clerk at the time, made changes to the employee handbook giving the City Clerk expanded authority and discretion over all City personnel including those directly reporting to the Mayor (R-26-833).
- Amber made changes to the employee handbook subsequent to the May complaints on August 13, 2026 that:
 - added an administrative review of a grievance by a “designated official” with no transparency as to who the designated official is.
 - added language to keep investigative records out of employee files.
- Amber made changes to the Employee Handbook that were presented to the Commission as a “clarification” however, made substantive changes to employee vacation accrual hours.

I hope this provides better insight into my concerns. I’m not asserting that I know what Ryan intended by his statement. My concern is the effect his threat has on employees, including myself, who have already taken the difficult step of reporting concerns and the experience they have suffered after reporting. The concern is not simply that someone made a statement that caused fear. It is that the statement occurred within a larger context in which employees have reported serious concerns, investigations have been incomplete or inadequately followed through, and individuals who report concerns have subsequently experienced changes that could reasonably be perceived as retaliatory. That history makes it difficult for me to separate the current investigation from my concern about retaliation. The fact that the City is devoting significant investigative resources to my September 22 email while previous complaints were not afforded the same level of attention, diligence, and resources raises legitimate questions about the purpose and scope of the current investigation.

I am concerned that employees who report misconduct may face retaliation and that the City's current processes may not provide adequate protection against it. I hope the City will consider outsourcing HR functions to an independent private firm. In a City of this size, its extremely difficult to maintain the appearance, much less the reality, of impartiality when HR personnel, administrators, supervisors, and employees may have personal or professional relationships with individuals involved in complaints. As I understand it, the City is in discussions with the City of Holmes Beach regarding certain HR functions. While I appreciate our neighboring City and the assistance it may provide, Homes Beach is also a small municipality on the same island. I therefore question whether that arrangement would adequately address the concerns regarding independence and impartiality.

I am hoping you can answer the following:

1. Who is the "designated official" now responsible for reviewing grievances according to the revisions to the Handbook?
2. What criteria or parameters did the City use in selecting the employees to receive interviews by Garret Olsen in May/June 2026?
3. Why weren't all employees who raised concerns interviewed?
4. What criteria or parameters did the City use in selecting the employees to receive interviews by Pota Papakos on October 2, 2026?
5. Why weren't all employees who witnessed or were copied on the September 22 email interviewed?
6. Why didn't May complaints receive the same level of attention, diligence, and investigative rigor as the current investigation into the September 22 email?
7. Why didn't investigating attorney Garret Olsen receive a copy of my May complaint and have no knowledge of other employee complaints?
8. Where is the documentation establishing that Tom completed the required harassment course within 60-days of his return?
9. Did the City's handling of the full scope of the May complaints follow the City's own zero-tolerance policies in Section III of the employee handbook?
10. Were the concerns surrounding nepotism investigated? Who conducted the investigation and where are the findings?
11. What was the basis for the change made to the Handbook effectively keeping investigation documents out of personnel files?

I am asking these questions because I believe transparency regarding how complaints are received, investigated, resolved, and followed through is essential to restoring employee confidence in the process. I remain willing to cooperate with the current investigation. At the same time, I believe it is important that my concerns regarding retaliation, disparate treatment, impartiality, and the handling of prior complaints be included as part of the City's consideration of the circumstances surrounding my September 22 email.

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