

MEMORANDUM



Human Resources Department

To: File

From: Joseph W. Faulds
Human Resources Director

Re: Kris Teske – Hostile Work Environment Claim

Date: February 2, 2021

KRIS TESKE'S HOSTILE WORK ENVIRONMENT CLAIM IS UNSUBSTANTIATED

On or about October 2, 2020, City Attorney Vanessa Chavez became aware of concerns Ms. Teske raised about the coordination and communication of responsibilities between the Mayor's office and the Clerk's office for the upcoming election. As an election lawsuit was pending, Attorney Chavez reached out to Director Diana Ellenbecker to determine the extent of the communication issues. Attorney Chavez determined the issues were primarily personnel-related issues and not legal concerns, so she reached out to me. We decided to meet with both Ms. Teske and Chief of Staff Celestine Jeffreys to determine the context and nature of the communication concerns and what we could do to help facilitate more productive communications between the departments. Additionally, Director Ellenbecker, City Attorney Chavez, and I all realized that there are challenges to coordinating an election while employees are working remotely and added effort from everyone was necessary to ensure we were all on the same page. As a result, all three of us remained actively involved in the ongoing communications to help things run smoothly and stay informed to any new issues that may arise.

Initially, City Attorney Chavez and I met with Ms. Teske and Chief of Staff Jeffreys separately to discuss what election projects and responsibilities were outstanding and what we could do to assign someone to track and monitor the progress of each project. During the meeting with Ms. Teske, she described her concerns working with the Mayor's staff and she stated it felt it was getting to the point of a hostile work environment. Ms. Teske's use of "hostile" was in reference to how she described the lack of communication and coordination of job responsibilities between her and the Mayor's Office. City Attorney Chavez and I continued to probe about concerns and at no point was there any reason to believe that Ms. Teske was asserting that the environment was hostile relative to unlawful harassment or discrimination, but rather due to a conflict of communication style and expectations between Ms. Teske and the Mayor's office. City Attorney Chavez and I stated that everyone's goal is to have a safe and efficient election and that the Clerk's office and Mayor's office need to communicate better and coordinate responsibilities.

On October 7, 2020, Ms. Teske, Director Ellenbecker, City Attorney Chavez, Chief of Staff Jeffreys and I met to address the concerns that both Ms. Teske and Chief of Staff Jeffreys had with regards to working on responsibilities and projects to prepare for the November election. The agenda items discussed during that meeting were as follows: (1) What is outstanding and what needs to be done for the election; (2) Who is going to work on the outstanding items; (3) Are there any concerns? If so, how do we address them?; and (4) How are updates going to be communicated between the Clerk's office and Mayor's office.

During that meeting, projects were assigned to either Ms. Teske or Chief of Staff Jeffreys and timelines were set to check in on the progress of each project. Both Ms. Teske and Chief of Staff Jeffreys were agreeable with the plan moving forward.

In the subsequent weeks, the Clerk's office and Mayor's office continued to work through election responsibilities. On October 22, 2020, Ms. Teske, Mayor Genrich, Chief of Staff Jeffreys, Director Ellenbecker, City Attorney Chavez, and I met to talk about early in-person voting and Election Day. The Mayor explained his expectations related to reducing the wait time for early in-person voting and his expectations for Election Day to run as efficiently as possible. His concern was that there were long lines for early voting, and since there already was a negative perception of how the April election was administered, he wanted to ensure there was an efficient and safe process for the voters on Election Day. Ms. Teske stated she felt that she was being reprimanded and that the Mayor's staff was creating a hostile work environment with how they were interacting with members of the Clerk's staff. The Mayor reiterated that his expectation for Ms. Teske was for her to communicate openly and honestly, to be flexible and adaptable to create a safe and efficient election, and to have a functional relationship between the Mayor's office and the Clerk's office. The Mayor's expectations are objectively reasonable and were appropriately communicated to the Clerk regarding the election process.

Ms. Teske was off work pursuant to her request for time off¹ and was unable to work as the City Clerk during the period right before the election to prepare for Election Day and was not able to work on Election Day. Clerk staff assumed the roles of City Clerk and Deputy City Clerk to administer early voting and oversee the Clerk's responsibilities of Election Day. The Mayor's office collaborated effectively with the Clerk's office staff with early voting and Election Day responsibilities.

On December 7, 2020 Ms. Teske sent an email to Director Ellenbecker stating that she is resigning effective December 31, 2020 and that she would have liked to retire with the City "...but under the hostile work environment conditions that isn't going to be possible, unfortunately."

I followed up in an email to ask Ms. Teske to clarify what she meant by stating she experienced a hostile work environment. In her first response, she indicated that she has brought up a hostile

¹ [REDACTED]

work environment to Directors and myself and that I would have witnessed it because I read emails and I was in Zoom meetings.

My response to her was that the context in which she referenced a “hostile work environment” was when the City Attorney and I met with her to discuss how we can improve the communication and ensure the responsibilities between the Clerk’s Office and Mayor’s office were properly assigned. I noted that at that time Ms. Teske did not articulate that she had any issues or concerns with the plan we had moving forward for the November Election after responsibilities had been distributed between the Clerk’s office and Mayor’s office.

On December 14, 2020 Ms. Teske responded that Mayor Genrich was included in her allegation of a hostile work environment. I responded with: “I asked that you explain what you were referencing when you used the term ‘hostile work environment.’ That is a phrase referencing a particular type of claim. You have provided nothing in furtherance of that assertion. Separately, and what it appears you are referring to, we held numerous meetings to discuss the communication difficulties between you and the Mayor’s office. I never witnessed in any of the meetings anyone being abusive towards you, certainly not the Mayor. Rather, the goal to everyone present at the time was to accomplish the election process smoothly and with greater success than the April election. As I mentioned, everyone agreed at the time, including you, that there was a plan moving forward.”

Based on the above, Ms. Teske’s hostile work environment claim is unsubstantiated. It is the policy of the City of Green Bay that all employees have the right to work in an environment free of all forms of harassment. Harassment is defined as any verbal, written, or physical act that creates a hostile, intimidating, or offensive work environment or interferes with an individual’s job performance. There were no interactions between the Mayor’s Staff or the Mayor and Ms. Teske that would rise to the level of a hostile work environment or be considered hostile, intimidating, or offensive. Further, there was no adverse action taken against Ms. Teske based on Ms. Teske’s gender, age, or any other protected status.

Since Ms. Teske is no longer an employee of the City, the City is unable to continue to work through any communication concerns between the Clerk’s office and the Mayor’s office. Human Resources will not be taking any further action regarding this matter.