

An Open Letter to Mayor Schor

Many questions have been raised about the end of my affiliation with the Lansing Fire Department. These questions, from members of the public and media, intensified with the most recent press release regarding diversity from Mayor Schor. Did I resign? Or, was I asked to leave? At this time, I would like to put the matter to rest. To be clear, I resigned from the Lansing Fire Department. Out of concern for the communities, and fire departments that I represented, and in an effort not to distract from larger issues (Income Tax Proposal or Financial Health Team, and Regionalism discussions) I provided only a vague explanation as my rationale for leaving. Subsequently, I feel the need to be more explicit to dispel rumors and insinuations that might be harmful to the department(s), communities and others affected by my decision.

First and foremost, I am not misguided, disgruntled or anti-union, as some have previously characterized me to be. I stand on my work record. My reputation throughout the community will attest to my character and my integrity.

As an experienced Fire Administrator, with nearly 35-years of fire service employment, 20-years as a Chief Officer, I have learned that much can be gleaned by the questions asked, and not asked by an individual. In my brief tenure with Mayor Schor, it became clear to me that he wanted to go in a different direction. This was not upsetting. It was his right. However, it was also clear that he was reluctant to make this decision and there appeared to be a need to find or create some alternate explanation to move forward. Perhaps, this was done for political reasons or fear of some type of push back. In any case, it made for an extremely uncomfortable work environment.

One might ask how I arrived at the conclusion that Mayor Schor wished to move on. I suppose, it was through the questions that were not asked and the perspectives not sought. My Fire Administration was not asked to participate, or provide any information, directly or indirectly, that might be useful or important to the Public Safety Committee of the Financial Health Team. This was a glaring omission. I can't imagine any scenario where that perspective would not be extremely important. We were not asked any questions about the hiring process that was instituted or the rationale for doing so. We were not asked what impact hiring only Paramedics would have on diversity, or the residential make-up that would likely result. Nevertheless, we provided the information and included it in the same presentation Mayor Schor has referenced for his statistics on the demographics of the fire department—our Council Budget Presentation. My Administration was not consulted or asked about any concerns with regard to Code Enforcement or any solutions that were being explored. In fact, in the 6-months that I worked for the new Mayor, I was not consulted on any issue of consequence in the organization and this was problematic for the department and community at-large. It was unhealthy, to say the least. No one benefits when such a clear lack of trust exists between an administrator and the Mayor. Given that context, I thought it best that I resign.

I have always taken great pride in my work. When I committed to lead two distinct fire departments, I understood there would be significant challenges. This would be further complicated by the difficult financial times that existed at the onset, in the face of massive staff turnover, and after deflating lay-offs and cutbacks that had already occurred. Nevertheless, I rolled up my sleeves and went to work. Each day I tried to give my very best and so did my Assistant Chiefs. Each day, my team of administrators made difficult decisions that were necessary for the benefit of the communities served recognizing that most times they would be very unpopular. I'm proud of the work that was done and the efforts of my staff. It

was not my desire to leave under controversial circumstances. Again, focused on the best interests of the Lansing Fire Department I resigned quietly in an effort to allow the Mayor to move forward in ways that he desired.

Unfortunately, despite my best efforts to be apolitical, to the extent a Fire Chief can be apolitical, I have found myself in the middle of political fallout and rumors through inference and insinuation. I have listened to podcasts that talk about low morale and poor equipment but fail to provide any context. To that end, I wonder if the Mayor or Interim Chief was even aware that in 6-1/2 half years we replaced 4-Fire Trucks; 6-Ambulances; all Heart Monitors; all Breathing Apparatus, all Personnel Protective Gear; and added Lucas CPR devices and protective Ballistics Gear for firefighter safety.

Additionally, we restored previously eliminated positions in Fire Prevention, Emergency Management, Fire Maintenance and Fire Training. We added an Assistant Chief and a Staff Officer to create opportunities and a plan for succession. We increased Automatic and Mutual Aid Agreements and expanded Regional Teams and training. We did these things while in a constant state of transition replacing 54-positions, all of which were supervisory; and dealing with complex emerging responsibilities caused by new Medical and Recreational Marijuana laws. Did I mention, we were also given the responsibility of managing Code Enforcement while all of this was happening? Many of the enhancements were the direct result of increased efficiency and savings realized by the difficult choices that were made. Tragically, we also dealt with an unfortunate firefighter fatality.

Through this tumultuous time, I also had constantly changing upper management working with 5-Assistant Chiefs because of retirements (assistant Chiefs Atkins, Tyler, Hamel, Jenkins and Odom). Yet, I am very thankful for their hard-work and dedication. The load they were asked to carry was unfair. It was not an easy job for any of us. But we quietly went about our duties day-in and day-out. So, when I hear about the low morale of the fire department and the poor state of the equipment. I would suggest to Mayor Schor, that he seek to get the whole story.

So, with that being said, for the benefit of all concerned, I am compelled to address the Mayor Schor's most recent press release more directly. I will respond to each issue raised point-by-point and share openly information which the Mayor may have been unaware but could have easily sought:

1. A. The Lansing Public Safety Youth Leadership Academy offered at Peckham originated under Mayor Bernero's Administration, and was done primarily for the purpose of exposing young Lansing students to Police, Fire and EMS careers. Assistant Chief Bruce Odom was instrumental in working with Lt. Rodney Anderson at LPD to get this program established. It was accompanied by outreach to the Lansing Boys and Girls Club and any other community group from whom we received an invitation or saw an opportunity to connect with young people.
- B. Fire Cadet Programs have been minimally successful in impacting inclusion in the Fire Service. This is especially true when the Cadet Program is implemented without pay. It is primarily due to the amount of time required for training to attain Firefighter I/II Certification and an EMT License. These are ultimately the things required that make an individual employable. For this reason, my Administration elected to start the Firefighter/EMT Trainee Program instead. We hired individuals at half the rate of pay of a full-paid firefighter and the "Trainees" received full-pay only after they were licensed and credential. This allowed LFD to reduce the time spent in training and required less expense and less sacrifice than a paid or unpaid Cadet Program. The Trainee Program

was 100% successful with all new hires completing the requisite training and becoming fully licensed and certified. This was also initiated under Mayor Bernero's Administration.

2. My Fire Administration was very cognizant of the need to have an appropriate mix of Paramedics and EMT's and the need to be inclusive and reflect the community we served. In fact, much of the diversity that the Mayor Schor is now pointing to is a direct result of changes made with this in mind. Additionally, Paramedics in the active ambulance rotation at LFD outnumber EMT's nearly 2 to 1. They outnumbered EMT's even before the most recent hiring process. Med Unit Rotational hours were tracked and averaged by Policy. No one Paramedic or EMT rides more hours than their peers. In my Administration, a total of 56 people were hired. Thirty-six were fully trained. (18-Paramedics; 18-EMTs) we also trained 18 individuals as either EMT's, Firefighter's or both. Two members were hired as replacements for staff that resigned while in probation. All of those hired as Trainees were City of Lansing Residents and Lansing School District Graduates (minority & non-minority). Additionally, under the leadership of Assistant Chief Bruce Odom, we worked with LCC to establish an in-house LFD Paramedic Training Program. Two of our hires successfully completed this program, and 3-others are now in training. So, 5-of our EMT hires will have gone on to become Paramedics.
3. Large urban departments have more flexibility with staff utilization. Smaller Fire Departments must hire Paramedics because it is more difficult to ensure meeting the State required minimum on-duty necessary to staff an ambulance. Use of Vacation, Sick and Injury Leave can result in a jurisdiction not having enough on-shift Paramedics to meet the State required mix of 1-Paramedic and 1-EMT. Again, Mayor Schor uses data from our own presentation to boast about the LFD record on diversity. However, he fails to cite the statistics that existed before our changes were instituted. I have a question. Why did you change them? Also, for the record, East Lansing is diverse and has an 8% Hispanic, 16% female, 4% Asian, 4% African American, and 68% White Male workforce. However, without a doubt we too are working to improve these numbers despite the challenges imposed because of the Paramedic License requirement and limitations of a small staff. But, I can also assure you inclusion has dramatically improved under my watch.
4. The Lansing Fire Department, under my Administration, conducted extensive Diversity Training before Mayor Schor was even elected. We utilized the services of a highly qualified and experienced local trainer that was degreed and formally trained in this area. In contrast, though I will not speak to the quality of the training that was provided by the out-state consultant engaged by Mayor Schor's Administration, I do think it is worth noting that a complaint was made against that particular consultant to the City's Human Resources Department and City Attorney's Office. Additionally, I found it concerning that the consultant had absolutely no conversations with myself, as the Fire Chief, or any of my Assistant Chiefs prior to meeting extensively with Fire Department Staff and conducting training for the entire department. I found this odd and it is definitely inconsistent with any past trainings I have been a part of. This is another example of the questions not asked and opinions not sought.

Ironically, I imagine, both Mayor Schor and his consultant, would be surprised to know I was one of 3-Fire Chiefs, along with 3-top Union Officials, selected to serve on a National Task Force

commissioned in a joint initiative of the International Association of Fire Chiefs (Management) and the International Association of Fire Fighters (Union) in 2009 tasked to examine the issue of promotions and diversity in fire service.

5. No agency, or administration, should tolerate racial insensitivity or discrimination. On this we have no disagreement. Unfortunately, insensitivity and inappropriate behavior can occur despite the best efforts of a Department Head. When it does, the only recourse is to address it, learn from it, and try to improve as an organization. This was always my Administration's intent and focus.
6. Agencies should hire for fit and the needs or issues that exists within a community. Pre-licensure and Pre-certification does not guarantee that you have addressed those things. Employment candidates that are screened for emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity and that must attain full licensure and credentials are very QUALIFIED for the job. Job performance must then be evaluated and assessed during the probationary period and continuously assessed throughout employment. Our testing process was developed after an independent job audit by Michigan Works Oral interview questions were developed by other non-affiliated Human Resource Staff Specialists. Physical agility test were required. Yet, our hiring process was more scrutinized, and more contested internally than any other that I am aware of. It withstood all of those questions and challenges. We made it as unbiased as we possibly could and that was not always welcomed.
7. Last, I agree that all complaints should be addressed appropriately; and I agree that major complaints should be addressed through HR, as happened in our case. How one may define appropriately certainly can be argued. But in either instance, we in Fire Administration, were very reliant upon the direction received from both the City's Human Resource Department and City Attorney's Office. We did as we were instructed on these matters deferring to their expertise. We would have been otherwise foolish to ignore or make decisions without adhering to the direction sought and received.

Finally, I will end with this. I'd be less than honest, if I had failed to say it was clear that some people, and some opinions, were valued, while others were never sought. But importantly, I am more distressed by the way Mayor Schor's Administration seemingly formed opinions about the people that worked in critical positions. I am concerned with the way certain Department Heads were pre-judged or completely disregarded. I witnessed this in the treatment of Planning Director Bob Johnson, Department of Human Resources Director Mary Riley, Lansing Housing Commission Director Martel Armstrong, Assistant Fire Chief Bruce Odom and I experienced this personally. Each of those identified have extensive work histories that support our qualifications and speaks to the contributions we have made to the communities we've served.

Certainly, Mayor Schor had the right to bring in his own staff. But the departing staff also deserved to be treated with dignity and respect for the hard-work and dedication they brought each day to very difficult jobs. So, to be blunt, I challenge your commitment to this recent press release. I call on you to set the example. In so doing, ask how could you conduct a nationwide search for a Fire Chief, in the State Capital no less, and not find a single protected class candidate worthy of at least an interview. It is disappointing to say the least and says a great deal about your concept of inclusion. You should have insisted upon this. If you don't on this, why would any of your Department Heads? You have a responsibility to not be blind to these matters.

So, I applaud you Mayor Schor for naming a Blue-Ribbon Diversity Commission. But, I suggest you go beyond just naming another commission. Make sure it serves a substantive purpose for the betterment of the community, not as an apparatus for personal political gain. With that, I encourage you to give the commission the authority and resources to seek the truth, address the problems and implement procedures and processes that will bring about much positive change in furtherance of diversity and inclusion. I suggest the Commission asks serious and meaningful questions perhaps beginning with these: Why would you move away from a hiring process that was so successful in moving toward inclusion (racial, gender, and community representation) in your workforce? Who pressured you to make this decision and why? What will you really do to make sure inclusion becomes a reality and not just a theoretical exercise? What are the City of Lansing's barriers to obtaining widespread and longstanding diversity? How will the City of Lansing overcome them? Are you prepared to push back and stand tall when you upset those that want you to maintain the status quo even if they are a political ally? These questions would be a very good place to start in this needed conversation and work. I wish you, the Residents of Lansing and the Lansing Fire Department much success , and progress, going forward.

Respectfully, 

Randall Talifarro – Former Fire Chief - City of Lansing

3/8/2019

- Please feel free to share in entirety if possible. In fact, while I know it may not be possible for some, I actually prefer that it be shared that way.