

Statement Regarding the City of Sturgis Investigation

By: Sonia Burkhead

After waiting months for the investigation to be completed and reading public comments regarding the conduct of City Commissioners, I feel compelled to share my experience so the community has a more complete understanding of what occurred, why concerns were raised, and how those concerns were handled.

I served as the Human Resources Manager/Director for the City of Sturgis for approximately 20 months. During my employment, I personally experienced, observed, and became aware of financial, legal, and compliance concerns, as well as employment actions that raised serious ethical questions.

I initially attempted to address these matters directly with the City Manager. After several months without meaningful action or resolution, I believed the concerns warranted escalation, consistent with my professional responsibilities and my belief that the matters required further examination.

On March 24, I reported my concerns to four of the nine City Commissioners.

On April 2, the City Attorney contacted me and stated that my concerns were being taken seriously and that he would engage an independent third-party investigator to examine the matters I had raised.

Approximately six weeks passed without any indication that an investigation had begun. On May 15, 2026, I contacted the City Attorney to ask about its status but was not provided with a substantive explanation for the delay.

As time passed without meaningful progress, the unresolved concerns and the circumstances surrounding their handling made it increasingly difficult for me to fulfill my Human Resources responsibilities in a manner consistent with my professional and ethical obligations.

On May 26, I submitted my resignation. That same day, because nearly two months had passed since I was first advised that an investigation would be initiated, I again contacted the City Attorney to request an update. I did not receive a response.

Following my resignation, I learned during a City Commission meeting that an investigation would proceed. This occurred after significant public pressure from a community member.

I was subsequently contacted by Mr. Reed's office to arrange an interview with the investigator. I later learned that the investigator was affiliated with a division of the City's labor attorney's office.

During the interview, I outlined the concerns I had reported regarding the City Manager and explained the basis for them. In my experience, however, the interview did not meaningfully explore the substance of those concerns. I was not asked substantive follow-up questions about the underlying facts, the individuals involved, or supporting information that could clarify the matters I had reported.

Instead, the discussion focused predominantly on how I raised my concerns, including my meetings with four members of the City Commission.

The investigator repeatedly returned to questions about how those meetings occurred, why I met with commissioners individually, and what was said during those conversations. To the best of my recollection, this line of questioning was revisited at least five times.

During that interview, I was not asked to provide additional details, documentation, or clarification regarding the underlying allegations.

Having reviewed the investigative report, I remain concerned that the emphasis shifted from the substance of the concerns I raised to the process by which I reported them. The report identifies my failure to follow the Employee Handbook's reporting procedure as the root cause of the events leading to the investigation, while the underlying allegations are redacted.

As a result, the public report does not provide meaningful answers about whether the underlying concerns were substantively examined, what conclusions were reached, or

whether they were appropriately addressed. I recognize that the report may reflect investigative steps beyond my own interview. My concern is that the report, as made available to the public, does not clearly establish how the underlying allegations were examined or resolved.

I recognize that the Employee Handbook identified the City Attorney as the appropriate recipient for concerns involving the City Manager. I understand the importance of established reporting procedures and do not dismiss their role in municipal operations.

However, I believe the circumstances surrounding my decision to contact members of the City Commission deserve consideration.

I had attempted for months to address the matters directly with the City Manager without meaningful resolution. Because the City Manager reports to the City Commission, I believed the elected officials responsible for overseeing the City Manager needed to be made aware of concerns that I believed warranted further examination.

I was also concerned about the close personal relationship between the City Manager and the City Attorney. Given the nature and seriousness of the concerns I was attempting to raise, that relationship contributed to my decision to inform members of the City Commission.

My decision was not made lightly or with the intention of creating unnecessary conflict. It reflected my prior attempts to resolve the concerns directly, my understanding of the City's organizational structure, and my professional judgment that the matters warranted further attention.

The report concludes that it was "almost certain" subsequent events would not have occurred had I followed the prescribed reporting procedure. I believe that conclusion warrants scrutiny when the public report does not provide meaningful information about the underlying allegations or how they were addressed.

There is also relevant context regarding the Employee Handbook itself. For nearly a year, I had been working to have the handbook reviewed and updated because it contained inconsistencies and outdated information. The proposed revisions remained with the City

Manager for approval. My efforts were intended to improve the accuracy and reliability of the City's personnel policies.

I offer this context not to suggest that reporting procedures are unimportant, but because the report places responsibility for the events that followed on the reporting process without meaningfully addressing the circumstances surrounding my decision or the underlying concerns I was attempting to bring forward.

Whether a reporting procedure was followed and whether the concerns being reported were adequately investigated are separate questions. Both deserve consideration. Even if a different reporting path should have been followed, that conclusion does not, by itself, answer whether the original concerns warranted investigation or whether they were appropriately addressed.

One of the most concerning aspects of what has unfolded is the way the public discussion has shifted. The commissioners I approached, along with the Mayor who have sought answers, have faced public criticism over how the concerns were brought forward and handled. The discussion has increasingly centered on the reporting process and the conduct of those who raised or received the concerns, rather than on the underlying issues that prompted them!

In my view, the commissioners who took the concerns seriously and sought further answers were responding to matters they believed warranted attention. Bringing concerns to elected officials responsible for overseeing the City Manager is not, in itself, evidence of wrongdoing. While the appropriateness of the reporting process can be debated, that debate should not automatically discredit efforts to obtain answers.

Public statements have challenged the Mayor's and commissioners decision to speak with me, including assertions that they violated the law. These developments have further directed public attention toward the conduct of those who received or responded to the concerns.

With an election approaching, I believe the community deserves an opportunity to evaluate these events with the full context available. Residents should be able to distinguish between questions about the reporting procedure and the separate question of whether serious concerns involving municipal leadership were adequately investigated.

My purpose is not to tell anyone how to vote or to suggest that elected officials should be exempt from scrutiny. It is to ensure that the concerns I raised, the reasons I raised them, and the subsequent handling of those concerns are considered alongside the public criticism directed at those who sought answers.

Accountability must apply to the handling of the original concerns as well as to the process by which they were reported. The community deserves answers about both.

I did not raise these concerns lightly. I first attempted to address them directly and escalated them when those efforts did not result in meaningful resolution. I did so because I took my responsibilities as Human Resources Director seriously and believed the matters warranted further review.

I am speaking publicly because I believe the community deserves a more complete understanding of what occurred, including the timeline, the reasons I raised my concerns, my experience with the investigative process, and the questions that remain following the public release of the report.

This is not simply a disagreement about procedure. It is about whether the concerns that prompted this process were meaningfully examined and whether the community has been given sufficient information to understand how they were handled.

An investigation should seek to understand the underlying facts, not simply examine the circumstances surrounding how those facts came to light. Accountability requires a willingness to examine the underlying issues, follow the facts wherever they lead, and address legitimate concerns regardless of the individuals involved.

The people of Sturgis deserve transparency, accountability, and confidence that serious concerns involving municipal leadership will be taken seriously, examined on their merits, and addressed appropriately, regardless of who raises them or whom they involve.

That is the standard I believed in when I served the City, and it is the standard I believe the community deserves today.