



City of Punta Gorda, Florida

OFFICE OF THE CITY MANAGER

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As many of you know, today I made the difficult decision to end Tom Lewis' employment as the Punta Gorda Police Chief. I know there are many questions about this process and I want to provide an overview of why this decision was made and how it developed over the past several days.

As I have repeatedly stated, the decision about Tom's status as police chief would depend on the findings of the internal affairs investigation, which began immediately after he was acquitted of misdemeanor charges in late June. Over the course of the past two months, our IA team conducted numerous interviews and from those interviews and other investigative work, compiled a report on their findings.

Overall, the report demonstrates a casual approach to citizen safety during demonstrations. The Punta Gorda Police Department has an exceptional record of safety protocols when conducting officer training, but citizen demonstrations showed an inexplicable departure from those protocols.

Whenever the potential for injury is present, police departments have an obligation to aggressively pursue safety. I did not find that to be the case in our department when citizen demonstrations were concerned. What I found was a non-standardized approach that created unnecessary risk for everyone involved.

Based on this information and after careful deliberation, I did not feel I could retain Tom as our chief of police. Our first discussion of that decision occurred on Friday, Aug. 25, when Tom also received a copy of the report to review. We discussed the possibility of resignation and Tom suggested a return to the department as a road lieutenant - a possibility I hadn't considered. We agreed to take the weekend to consider the options and reconvene on Monday, Aug. 28.

At the meeting on Monday, I told Tom I could not support his return to the department as a road lieutenant because I strongly believe that, with new leadership, having a previous chief in a lower position would only create confusion, conflict and division. I fully believe Tom had the best intentions in mind and suggested this option because of his commitment to this community, but I do not believe it would be in the department's best interest, nor in the best interest of our community in the long run.

Upon the removal of this option and other considerations, Tom told me he did not intend to resign. He was informed that if he did not resign, termination was the only other option. He left the meeting saying he would not resign, but - and I want to make this very clear - no action was taken at this meeting.

Over the past 48 hours, we held off on taking any action because I was holding out hope Tom would reconsider and we could complete a separation amicably. However, after a final conversation with Tom this morning and having no other option, I sent him a termination notice. Pursuant to our city charter, I also informed each council member of the pending disciplinary action.

I know there has been an outpouring of support for Tom, and I have received more than 100 letters, emails and visits over the past two months. I believe this is a clear indication of Tom's commitment and dedication to this community, and I respect the relationships he has built and fostered here. Tom is a fine man and I truly wish him the best in his next endeavor. However, I cannot retain a leader based on character alone.

We will begin a national search for a new police chief immediately, and Captain Jason Ciaschini will continue to serve as interim chief until a new candidate has been selected and installed. We have begun the review and redaction of the materials in the internal affairs investigation and will make them available to the public as soon as any material statutorily protected from disclosure has been removed. I also want to thank our IA team, led by Lt. Terry Cochran and consisting of our lawyer, Brian Koji, retired Police Chief Arnold Gibbs, and Todd Everly, the head of the Southwest Florida Public Service Academy, for their efforts to provide a thorough and independent review of the situation.

I know this is an extremely difficult development, but this has been an extremely difficult process, starting with the tragic loss of one of our citizens just over a year ago. With this action today, I am optimistic that we can now fully move forward and continue our healing process.



Howard Kunik
City Manager