

Resignation Letter

Dear Key West residents and voters,

Some of you have asked why I resigned from my position as Planning Director with the City of Key West, effective yesterday September 1. Here's why.

I knew from my father, George Halloran, a long time community activist and former Key West City Commissioner, that working at Key West City Hall would be, to some degree, political. I sought a master's degree in community and regional planning knowing the field was concerned with tough and politicized issues that directly affect lives and bank accounts, such as property rights, affordable housing, and sea level rise. When I accepted the job as Planning Director in 2019 and decided to return to Key West, I anticipated a challenge but I was also excited to work as a professional planner for the betterment of my home town.

I knew that a fully functional Planning Department could deliver on workforce housing, minimize climate risks such as flooding, and help address adverse impacts of gentrification and vacation rentals. Unfortunately, high turnover had plagued the department for years. It was apparent early in my tenure that the Planning Department needed more professional staff. Each year I approached city management and elected officials to hone the Department's budget and increase salaries to attract professional staff and retain a high quality professional workforce. These efforts were minimally successful. Despite our best efforts, the Department remained underfunded and understaffed.

My colleagues and I regularly encountered questionable development review practices and I repeatedly brought these concerns to a series of City Managers. Eventually, former city manager Al Childress sought a third-party consulting firm to investigate and confirm the problems we had witnessed. The resulting report, now known as The Corradino Report, was launched due to information brought forward by Planning Department staff, with input from others. Soon after publication of the Report, Childress was fired, and then the State Attorney and FBI began to investigate.

A Grand Jury report documented many of the same concerns identified in The Corradino Report. Those of us that had raised concerns about improper land development review for years thought its release would improve work conditions at City Hall. This was a misguided expectation. Conversely, the hostility directed at Planning Department staff has worsened under current city manager Brian Barroso's administration.

In January I was disciplined for not responding to an email for three days, allegedly preventing the City from resolving a complaint made by the HARC Inspector against the Chief Building Official. This disciplinary action came despite the fact that I had spent more than a year working with the HARC Inspector to remedy the very same issue. The HARC Inspector's complaint, submitted in late 2024, still has not been fully resolved.

Soon after, Barroso removed funding from the Planning Department and used these funds to hire Patrick Wright for the newly created position of Growth Management Director. In April, Barroso cut another position, dismissing a candidate we had just hired. Barroso also ordered Planning Department staff to physically move out of the Planning suite at City Hall, calling this "realignment". Eventually all Planning Department staff associated with community redevelopment, urban forestry, historic preservation, and climate resiliency, were moved out

of the planning department. While Barroso stated that the intent was to provide me with more time to focus on planning, the moves hampered our efforts to resolve issues such as flood risk mitigation through climate planning, which requires extensive interdisciplinary teamwork.

Soon after Wright arrived, he began to impose unreasonable discipline he referred to as “coaching” of staff. A top performing planner’s out-of-class pay was removed without notice, while the same workload persisted. In one instance, the City Manager explained to me that small office celebrations to recognize staff birthdays, were something that had to be “earned”. These and other chilling practices led to the early retirement and resignation of half the planning department staff. Exit interviews provided by these former staff describe in much more detail the untenable work environment at City Hall. The Planning Department has now been effectively dismantled.

In April, I submitted a complaint to the Human Resources Director regarding the City Manager. I was informed by the Interim City Attorney that the complaint must remain confidential to protect the investigation. After four months of no substantive progress to resolve the complaint, a new investigator was hired last week. I am tentatively hopeful the City’s investigator will publish her report, that the City Commission will respond, and share the findings with the public.

After years of service to the City and only positive performance evaluations, I took approved medical leave this summer to provide care for my father, who suffers from Alzheimer’s disease. During this time, the City has blocked my email, emptied my office of my personal belongings, and given my office to Patrick Wright, without my prior knowledge or consent.

I am deeply concerned that implementation of the Grand Jury’s recommendations will remain a mirage. Perhaps this will be beneficial to some. But special treatment for some is an unfair disadvantage for many others. If you aren’t a well-connected property owner or business person, and you have to play by rules that others can bypass, you cannot compete. If you need strong housing programs to stay in Key West, a City staff in disarray will be unable to find solutions. If you care about protecting your property as climate risks increase and you expect the City to take real action to address dirty beach water, we can’t continue to sideline our resiliency team.

Regardless of your policy objectives, the hostile work environment at City Hall today is not conducive to positive progress. It is exhausting and frustrating to attempt professional land use planning at this juncture. Key West is my home town. I want to serve the public, but at this time I am sure my time is better invested outside City government.

Thank you to the Key West community members and to my colleagues for all your hard work, support, and involvement these past 5+ years.

Katie Pearl Halloran