

This didn't start with a lawsuit. It didn't start with a court order. It started in 2023, when I decided to run for Spokane Valley City Council.

I ran on a simple platform: improve our city, oppose unnecessary taxes, stop wasteful spending, push back against overdevelopment, improve public safety, and most importantly, be available to the people who elected me. I promised I would communicate directly with residents, especially through Nextdoor, because I believe elected officials should be accessible and accountable.

At the time, I believed many of the problems facing our city were simply the result of council decisions. After taking office, my perspective changed. I came to believe that many of those decisions were heavily influenced by an entrenched group of senior city staff who had become accustomed to operating without much opposition and who viewed my campaign and my priorities as a threat to the status quo.

In November of 2023, the voters elected me to represent them.

That same month, before I had even been sworn in, I requested what I believed would be a friendly meeting with then-Mayor Pam Haley to discuss priorities for the coming year. Instead, from my perspective, the meeting quickly became confrontational. By the end of the discussion, I was told that attorneys were already working on the "problem" of getting me off Nextdoor.

Last night, Mayor Haley stated she had never even heard of Nextdoor until after I took office. I disagree with that account because publicly available information indicates her own Nextdoor profile dates back to 2017.

Also during November 2023, the City began pursuing contract changes involving City Hall that would later be attributed to me, even though those discussions had already begun.

Then came December.

Staff held what was described as a safety meeting where concerns were raised suggesting I posed a safety risk to City Hall. That was shocking to me. During my campaign I had personally visited more than 5,000 homes throughout Spokane Valley. I had spent months meeting residents face-to-face in their neighborhoods.

During my very first council meeting, Councilmember Rod Higgins publicly suggested that something should be done to prevent me from using Nextdoor.

Only four months after voters elected me, in February of 2024, staff initiated an outside investigation alleging that I had somehow been abusive toward city employees.

The investigation found no policy violations or misconduct. Yet it still included broad character criticisms.

Later, through public records requests, I learned something important: not a single employee reported having a negative direct interaction with me. Instead, many statements consisted of secondhand observations or stories employees had heard from others.

At roughly the same time, the City adopted a new social media policy as part of the Governance Manual—even though the Governance Committee itself had been unable to function because of ongoing conflicts among councilmembers.

In May of 2024, Councilmembers Haley and Higgins authorized retaining a private investigator through outside counsel. From my perspective, that investigation unnecessarily involved members of my family and contributed to public accusations that I believe were unfair and untrue.

Then, in June of 2024, Councilmember Jessica Yaeger filed a complaint alleging I violated the Governance Manual through my social media activity.

Ironically, over the following year, allegations were later raised regarding her own social media conduct, and the outcome was similar to mine violation of social media policy. To me, that illustrates something important. Either the City's guidance regarding social media was unclear, or these rules were being interpreted inconsistently. I have always maintained that my conduct never violated the Governance Manual. If someone who believed I had violated the rules later engaged in similar conduct herself, it raises legitimate questions about how these standards were understood and enforced.

Then came early 2025.

Although I strongly disagreed with the City's demands, I made every effort to comply while preserving my legal rights.

I connected all of my social media accounts to the PageFreezer archiving system the City had long maintained was necessary.

I provided access to my Nextdoor account.

I provided two-factor authentication.

I provided my Nextdoor data.

None of this is disputed. The City's own court filings acknowledge these facts. Yet despite that, I believe the public narrative has often suggested otherwise.

Despite my efforts to comply, the City chose to sue one of its own elected officials using taxpayer money.

The City retained outside counsel from City Attorney Kelly Konkrite's former law firm without a competitive bidding process. To date, that representation has cost taxpayers well over half a million dollars.

There was no outside lawsuit threatening the City.

No citizen had sued.

No emergency existed.

This was a choice.

Throughout this process we have repeatedly been told, "This isn't about silencing Councilmember Merkel."

But I believe the proposed legal framework tells a different story.

Under that interpretation, virtually every discussion an elected official has about city affairs could be considered government business.

If every discussion about city government must occur only through government-controlled channels, then government also gains the ability to regulate those discussions.

Our Governance Manual already prohibits councilmembers from "disparaging" others through official communications, while leaving significant discretion over what constitutes disparagement.

That creates a troubling principle.

If officials may only speak through channels controlled by government, and government controls the rules governing those channels, then government gains tremendous influence over what elected officials may safely say.

I also believe this creates an impossible situation for campaigning.

How can an elected official seek reelection based on his or her record if discussing that record is treated as official government communication?

The implications extend far beyond Spokane Valley.

This case could affect elected officials throughout Washington by discouraging them from communicating directly with constituents or criticizing the governments they serve.

So why has there been such sustained opposition to me?

I'll let the public draw its own conclusions.

During my time on the council, I have consistently voted against spending that I believed was unnecessary.

I opposed projects like the Sprague Road Diet.

I opposed the costly roundabout.

I pointed out that our City Manager earns more than the Governor of Washington while living outside Spokane Valley.

I questioned compensation levels within City Hall that I believe exceed what many residents would expect.

I successfully pushed for additional police staffing.

From my very first council meeting, I proposed eliminating the vehicle license fee.

Every budget season I have proposed spending reductions and lower taxes.

This year I even proposed returning tax dollars directly to Spokane Valley residents.

Whether people agree with every vote I've cast or not, my positions have never been hidden.

Everything I've said has been said publicly.

Every resident has been free to read my posts, disagree with me, challenge me, or support me.

That is exactly how representative government should work.

I intend to appeal this ruling because I believe elected officials should enjoy the same freedom every citizen has to criticize government, question spending, advocate for change, and communicate directly with the people who elected them.

Government should never become the gatekeeper between elected representatives and their constituents.

I didn't run to protect the establishment, the establishment sucks.

I ran to challenge it.

And that is exactly what I intend to keep doing.

Thank you.

❓ "I wasn't elected to protect the establishment, the establishment sucks. I was elected to challenge it."

❓ "This case was never just about one councilmember or one social media account. In my view, it's about whether elected officials can communicate directly with the people who elected them."

❓ "Government should never become the gatekeeper between elected representatives and their constituents."

❓ "I believe taxpayers should not have to fund lawsuits against their own elected representatives when there is no outside legal threat."

❓ "Every position I've taken has been public. Nothing was hidden. Every resident could read my posts and decide for themselves whether they agreed."

❓ "If government can decide where elected officials are allowed to speak, it gains enormous influence over what they are willing to say."

❓ "Representative government depends on open debate, not controlled debate."

❓ "I will appeal because I believe public officials should have the same freedom as every citizen to criticize government."

❓ "The voters sent me to City Hall to ask difficult questions, not to become another vote for business as usual."

❓ "I have consistently opposed higher taxes, wasteful spending, and policies that make Spokane Valley less affordable. That's the record I was elected to build."

❓ "This isn't just about me. The precedent could affect every elected official in Washington."

❓ "When elected officials become afraid to speak directly with constituents, it is the public—not the establishment—who lose."

❓ "Transparency doesn't mean only speaking through government-approved channels. Transparency means letting the public hear directly from their elected officials."

❓ "You don't strengthen democracy by limiting communication between citizens and the people they elected."

❓ "I promised during my campaign that I would be accessible. I intend to keep that promise."