

Report on the Investigation into Allegations Against Council Member Al Merkel

Objective

This report examines the validity of allegations against Council Member Al Merkel regarding bullying, harassment, and creating a hostile work environment. The investigation relied on interviews with City of Spokane Valley staff and council members, as well as assessments from external consultants.

Summary of Findings

1. Lack of Substantiated Incidents Post-Election

- Among all the interviews conducted, **only Haley's account included a substantive incident involving Council Member Merkel after his election in 2024**. This isolated incident allegedly involved raised voices and perceived intimidation during a late-night conversation in council chambers. However, the account raises **significant questions of credibility**:
 - **Delayed Complaint Submission**: Haley did not report the incident until three months later and only after being prompted during the investigation.
 - **Destroyed Video Evidence**: Questionably, the city destroyed surveillance footage of the alleged event, leaving the claims entirely uncorroborated.
 - **Political Motivations**: Haley has clear political incentives to discredit Council Member Merkel, given her alignment with opposing positions and her history of criticism toward him.

2. Hearsay Dominates the Evidence

- The majority of allegations against Council Member Merkel are **pure hearsay**, consisting of second-hand accounts, vague descriptions of discomfort, and speculative fears:
 - Staff members frequently described Merkel as a "volatile internal threat" but failed to provide **specific or documented examples** of threatening behavior.
 - Concerns raised by staff regarding "firearms," the council member's "tone," and his interactions with supporters lack any substantive basis or direct evidence. These appear exaggerated and rooted in speculation rather than fact.

3. Speculative Fears Amplified by Outside Influence

- A security consultant hired to assess City Hall staff safety **magnified speculative fears** about Council Member Merkel. The consultant, based on generalized employee concerns, described the council member as a safety threat. However:
 - No tangible incidents or threats by Merkel were identified during the interviews.

- Concerns about active shooters and unauthorized access to City Hall were treated as more credible than warranted, as no credible evidence links these concerns to Merkel or his supporters.
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Evidence Suggesting a Conspiracy Against Merkel

1. Pre-Election Narrative Setting by City Leadership

- City Manager John Hohman emphasized to staff the need to be wary of Council Member Merkel even before he took office, suggesting a **preconceived narrative of hostility or danger** tied to Merkel's tenure.

2. Staff-Led and Council-Endorsed Secret Meetings

- Secret meetings were reportedly held, ostensibly to address Robert's Rules of Order, but they used **city staff time and resources** and included discussions aimed at undermining Council Member Merkel's credibility.
- These meetings appear orchestrated to exclude Merkel from decision-making and to frame him as an obstacle to City Hall operations.

3. Efforts to Magnify Employee Concerns

- A security consultant was brought in to escalate concerns about workplace safety. Employee fears—based on vague descriptions of Merkel as “volatile” and “intimidating”—were amplified by the consultant's report, despite lacking substantive evidence of actual threats or dangerous behavior.

4. Hostility Toward Merkel's Political Style and Constituents

- Staff and council members repeatedly criticized Merkel's questioning of staff efficiency and transparency during public meetings. While robust oversight is a council member's duty, it was framed as “accusatory” and “disrespectful.”
- Staff also voiced discomfort with Merkel's supporters attending council meetings, referring to them as a disruptive element. These criticisms suggest a broader hostility toward Merkel's political approach and the constituents he represents.

5. Disproportionate Focus on Speculative Concerns

- The introduction of firearm policies and discussions during meetings underscores the efforts to cast Merkel as a danger, despite no evidence supporting such claims. Merkel, as an elected official who campaigned door-to-door with thousands of residents, should not be viewed as a legitimate safety risk based on baseless fears.
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Conclusion

This investigation has uncovered **no direct or substantiated evidence** that Council Member Al Merkel bullied, harassed, or created a hostile work environment for City of Spokane Valley staff. The majority of allegations are rooted in hearsay, speculative fears, and politically motivated narratives, amplified by leadership and external consultants.

The investigation further suggests that there is likely a **coordinated effort by staff and council members to discredit Merkel**, driven by his criticisms of city operations and his outsider political style. Evidence supporting this includes:

1. **Pre-election warnings by city leadership** encouraging staff to distrust Merkel.
2. **Secret staff and council meetings** targeting Merkel under the guise of procedural discussions.
3. **Amplification of unsubstantiated fears** through consultants and leadership, portraying Merkel as a safety threat without evidence.

The destruction of key video footage of the only substantive incident involving Merkel further undermines the credibility of this investigation. Given the context, it is reasonable to conclude that **this inquiry is politically motivated** and part of a broader effort to undermine and isolate Council Member Merkel.

Recommendations

1. **Objective Oversight and Accountability**
 - Any future concerns involving council members must be based on documented, specific incidents and handled transparently.
 - Investigations must avoid reliance on hearsay or politically motivated narratives.
2. **Address Staff Bias and Political Interference**
 - Leadership should ensure staff neutrality in handling interactions with elected officials, avoiding the appearance of bias or undue influence.
 - Discussions about council members should not take place in secret meetings or use city resources improperly.
3. **Restore Public Confidence**
 - Public disclosure of this investigation's findings is essential to demonstrate transparency and address any lingering perceptions of bias or conspiracy.

This investigation, as it stands, raises far more concerns about the motivations and behaviors of City Hall leadership and staff than it does about Council Member Al Merkel.