



King County

**Claudia Balducci, Chair
Metropolitan King County Council**

February 25, 2021

Rod Dembowski, Councilmember
Metropolitan King County Council
King County Courthouse
516 Third Avenue, Suite 1200
Seattle, WA 98104-3272

Councilmember Dembowski:

I am writing to address ongoing tensions in our workplace that have been reported to me over time, related to your interactions with colleagues and subordinates. We have communicated about these issues previously in person. Because another incident occurred last Friday morning, I feel that it is important to convey my concerns to you in writing.

A number of people in the legislative branch have come to me with concerns and complaints about your treatment of them and others, especially since I began serving in leadership. These reports have come from and have been about treatment of fellow elected officials, our chief of staff, our former chief legal counsel, and staff in both the legislative branch and other parts of County government.

We've discussed some of these concerns in person, especially the ones involving our chief of staff, which led to an intervention by Vice Chairs Dunn and me while you were Council chair. As you know, Councilmember Dunn and I arranged for a facilitator to assist you and the chief of staff in making commitments about how you would work together. I personally witnessed you lose your temper and become verbally abusive toward our former legal counsel, causing that seasoned and highly-respected professional to offer his resignation on the spot. A number of colleagues and subordinate staff have spoken to me about the stress they have experienced based on your behavior toward them or that they have observed toward others. I have heard from other leaders in the branch that they, too, have been approached by staff members with serious concerns. I have shared with you on more than one occasion how I have personally felt disrespected by the way you treated me in front of others. Many reports have been made in confidence because of fears of retaliation, which are especially acute based on the power of elected officials and the very limited means of holding us accountable.

I have observed two common features in these situations: First, that they often involve women on the receiving end of your harsh treatment. Second, the issues seem to arise when you feel that you are not getting something that you want. Just a few examples: The conflict with our chief of staff arose when the Council was voting on a legislative proposal to assign her greater management authority, a proposal

that you initially opposed. The situation with our former legal counsel arose when you were unhappy with a personnel decision being made by council. The conflicts you and I have experienced have centered around situations where we disagreed on a course of action – for example when you suggested that council members conduct a critical after-action or “lessons learned” review of the council’s Parks levy proposal while I was leading that work as budget chair. You repeatedly insisted on undertaking such a review even after I shared that I felt the suggestion was disrespectful of my position and would undermine the ongoing work.

Last week, another situation arose where you expressed that you were not satisfied with a course of action and took it upon yourself to pressure staff in an inappropriate manner. As you know, an inter-branch team of legislative and executive staff had been working for almost two months on a proposed ordinance to lay out the process for implementing charter amendments regarding the County Sheriff’s Office. Councilmembers were represented by their chiefs of staff and the Executive by his legislative liaison and policy staffers, each of whom explicitly brought the interests and suggestions of their elected officials to the table for negotiation. Your office had the same ability to bring your interests and concerns forward and have them considered as Councilmember Zahilay’s, Executive Constantine’s and mine.

This past Wednesday, after several weeks of work, and just a few days before the proposed ordinance was scheduled to be introduced and made public, you communicated to Councilmember Zahilay and me that the final recommendation was not acceptable to you. You offered to send a written proposal of your own, which you did on Thursday morning. Your new proposal took the work in a very different direction. Councilmember Zahilay, as the lead on this project, immediately reached out to me and suggested that he would be willing to work on a possible compromise. I assume that he said this to you and Executive Constantine as well, although I was not part of any further conversations that day.

On Friday morning, I was alerted by my chief of staff that you had joined the staff group’s Zoom meeting. You did not notify the other elected officials that you were doing this, and you were the only elected on the call. You reportedly attended the meeting for almost an hour and engaged actively to convince the staff group that your proposal was the right one and that they should adopt it as their recommendation. Your presence at the meeting made the staff in attendance uncomfortable.

When I learned of your attendance at the staff meeting, I texted Councilmember Zahilay and you that morning and expressed my concerns that we were not notified that you would attend the staff-only meeting. I noted the power differential that occurs when a Councilmember joins a staff meeting. In your text response, you acknowledged the power differential, but took no responsibility for the impact of that differential on the staff who participated in the meeting.

Even if you are completely correct on the substance of an issue at hand, the rightness of your policy position does not justify your use your position of power to pressure or bully staff or colleagues. We should have all learned by now that impact matters more than intent when assessing the work environment we are creating around us. Perceiving people who have lesser power in an organization as “peers,” as you suggested when I contacted you about last Friday’s situation, doesn’t make it so.

We owe it to our staff and to each other to create a healthy and respectful working environment. As chair, I feel a special obligation to achieve such a working environment. This letter is an attempt to share

my concerns with you directly so that you have the information you need to correct this situation before it becomes even more serious.

I am taking the following actions: (1) several weeks ago, I asked our chief of staff to complete the proposed legislative branch code of conduct, which code will also apply to elected officials. The need for a code of conduct that goes beyond rules that provoke disciplinary action has been identified for some time. Completing and adopting a code of conduct will be important for our entire branch, setting baseline expectations for how we treat each other in order to maintain a professional and healthy working environment. I hope you will join me in supporting this work. (2) By this letter, I am notifying you that if I continue to receive reports of staff feeling mistreated, I will bring the situation to the attention of the full council and seek appropriate action.

I urge you to consider that this has been an ongoing series of complaints from a number of different people over a number of years. Arguing the rightness or wrongness of any individual situation does not negate the overall pattern or its impact on our work environment. As leaders of the legislative branch, it is incumbent on us to always keep in mind the power of our positions and the impact we have on those around us. I am available to talk or assist if there is anything I can do toward creating a positive and respectful work environment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Claudia M. Balducci". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'C' and 'B'.

Claudia Balducci
King County Council Chair