

DATE: August 13, 2026

TO: Mayor Jermaine Sullivan and the Manistee City Council

FROM: John A. Dodson

SUBJECT: Formal Request for Independent Investigation into Administrative Misconduct, Unauthorized Expenditures, and Severe Departmental Attrition

Dear Mayor Sullivan and Members of the City Council,

As the Manistee Regional Fire Initiative (MRFI) collapses, I formally urge this Council to take immediate and decisive action regarding the leadership of City Manager William Gambill and Fire Chief Thomas Hernden. The failure of the steering committee is not the primary issue; it is the event that has exposed a pattern of **unauthorized expenditures, retaliatory workplace practices, financial waste, and a rapidly escalating staffing crisis** that now threatens the City's ability to meet its basic licensed EMS obligations.

For the past year, information provided to this board by the City Manager and Fire Chief has not accurately reflected operational or financial reality. The administration has repeatedly characterized the MRFI effort as a "*Council-directed*" initiative. Budget documentation demonstrates otherwise: the concept was advanced by the administration itself. The guidance provided by this administration to date has not provided the reassurance that the current leadership can successfully navigate the staffing emergency it has created. Effective dates on the resignations received this week are looming. This cannot wait.

I. Severe Attrition, Loss of Critical Leadership Positions, and Squandered Investments

The current administrative environment has produced the **loss of 8 staff (6 Firefighters and 2 Captains)** since June 2024. Personnel who raise operational or safety concerns have faced adverse employment actions rather than systemic correction.

Captain Christopher Jeffries submitted his resignation at 0800 today. Captain Jeffries' resignation makes this situation critical. The Department has now lost two of its three captains—positions that also served as Fire Marshal and Department Training Officer—eliminating the very senior staff who could train and mentor newer members.

The department is now facing a **remaining staff of 5 total**. Two of those five have less than one year with the City Fire Department and **are not yet paramedics**. The loss of experienced captains capable of providing training and mentorship leaves these newer members without the institutional support necessary to develop into independent, fully qualified providers in a timely manner.

Notable examples of the attrition include:

- In February 2026, a frontline firefighter reported severe operational hazards. Mayor Sullivan directed that firefighter to utilize the proper chain of command with the City Manager and Fire Chief. The firefighter followed that direction. Shortly thereafter he was the subject of a Loudermill hearing and an emergency suspension, while public attention was redirected to the MRFI proposal.
- The department's first female firefighter, Anna VanDuinen, resigned. In her formal notice she stated that she did not feel she was *"the right fit for the culture within the department."* Her departure not only underscores a toxic administrative culture but also **actively squanders municipal and state training investments**, as she was enrolled in paramedic school with funding tied to city agreements and Michigan Works scholarships.
- Firefighter/Paramedic Jordan LaPoint—a legacy hire whose father served the department for more than thirty years—submitted his formal resignation effective August 28, 2026. In that letter, Mr. LaPoint stated: *"I am resigning because I have lost confidence in the current leadership at the Fire Department and in the City's handling of the multiple concerns raised by its firefighters in the last 12–18 months. I, and others, have documented those concerns through the appropriate channels and I stand by them."*

Driving out personnel who are actively being trained at the taxpayers' expense, while simultaneously losing the senior captains responsible for training and mentoring the remaining staff, is a **severe dereliction of administrative duty**.

II. Unauthorized Expenditures, Regional Opposition, Critical Staffing Shortfalls, and Active Law-Enforcement Scrutiny

Administrative decisions have generated unnecessary costs, alienated vital regional healthcare partners, reduced operational capacity below sustainable levels, and triggered external investigation.

- **Unauthorized Study Expenditure and Ignored Opposition:** The central issue regarding the **\$15,000** cooperative emergency-services study is not simply whether budget lines were later altered; it is that the original authorization was **strictly contingent upon intergovernmental and stakeholder buy-in**. The 2024–2025 City Budget under Fire/EMS stated explicitly:

"The budget includes partial funding of \$15,000 for a cooperative study of emergency services in this area. The goal would be to take a deep dive and comprehensive look at the current fire & EMS landscape and service delivery methods; and make recommendations on how to strengthen those services, address existing service and funding challenges, and determine what the optimal service delivery method(s) could look like. The study would not go forward without cooperation and funding from the other entities so that each local unit of government (and MMR) would have buy-in and a financial commitment up-front."

- That buy-in never happened. Instead, many identified participants had no knowledge of the initiative, while others declared formal opposition. Mobile Medical Response (MMR)—the region’s primary ALS provider that currently provides services at no direct cost to taxpayers—formally stated on April 28, 2026, in a written submission by CEO Laurie Thiel, that they *"do not support the proposal outlined in the white paper."* MMR explicitly warned that the proposal would cut their 911 call volume by approximately **45%**, resulting in a significant revenue loss that may necessitate service adjustments and deployment changes. Furthermore, MMR data proved that the current tiered system already achieves a **12%** cardiac arrest survival-to-discharge rate, which is nearly double the state average of **8.4%**. Despite the clear absence of the required buy-in and the active, documented opposition of essential regional partners, the administration proceeded with the study and related expenditures—**ultimately exceeding \$25,000 in taxpayer funds** on consulting and promotional marketing for the PA 57 authority proposal—in direct violation of the original stipulations.
- **Imminent Staffing Crisis and the Mathematical Reality:** Upon the next resignation, the City will be operating with only four regionally approved EMS personnel who can work alone. The agency’s license requires continuous 24/7 paramedic coverage. The simple math is undeniable: 24/7 coverage equals **168 hours per week**. Staffing two personnel on a single ambulance around the clock demands **336 staffing hours every single week**. Dividing 336 hours among only four independent providers requires each individual to work **84 hours per week** just to maintain baseline legal compliance—**leaving absolutely zero margin for sick leave, vacation, training, or unexpected absences**.

How long will it take to repair this damage and get the department up to speed again? The process to post, recruit, hire, and successfully clear a new employee to independent operational status is not quick—it takes many months and, in the current environment, potentially years. Last year, Chief Hernden himself identified a staffing crisis in his white paper. The administration does not appear to have recognized that the crisis now confronting the department is the one its own actions have created and accelerated.

- **Legal Notification Requirements: Michigan Administrative Code R 325.22116** (Inability to provide service) imposes clear, mandatory duties when a life support agency cannot operate or staff at least one vehicle for response to an emergency within its service area. The agency **shall**:
 - Immediately notify the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services and the medical control authority if it cannot provide at least one life support vehicle available for response on a 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week basis;
 - Immediately notify the department of any change that would alter the information on its application;
 - Notify the dispatch center (and other public safety agencies if appropriate) of the period it will be out of service and the name of the covering agency; and
 - Notify life support agencies providing mutual aid.

These notification requirements exist to protect public safety. The pattern of attrition, the loss of training and mentoring capacity, and the looming effective dates of recent resignations raise serious and urgent questions about whether these mandatory notifications have been made—or will need to be made within days.

- **Active Sheriff's Department Investigation:** The closed-door operations of the steering committee have moved beyond civil process concerns. A detective from the Manistee County Sheriff's Department is actively gathering information and conducting an investigation into Open Meetings Act (OMA) compliance issues arising from this process.
- **ULPs, MIOSHA Citation, and Continuing Exposure:** Three Unfair Labor Practice cases have been closed after consuming City resources and resulting in administrative concessions. A federal lawsuit remains pending, and additional ULP exposure continues. On April 22, 2026, the MIOSHA Enforcement Division conducted an inspection and formally cited and fined the City of Manistee for N95 respiratory protection fit-testing failures.

When citizens have sought basic records under the Freedom of Information Act, fee estimates have been structured in a manner that effectively obstructs access to the underlying communications and data.

III. Public Accountability and Formal Request for Independent Investigation

Citizens support the fire department and the services it delivers. They remain largely unaware of the internal conditions, the bypass of explicit budget restrictions, the loss of critical leadership and training capacity, the potential failure to comply with mandatory EMS notification requirements, and the rapidly approaching staffing shortfall that could compromise the City's ability to meet its licensed 24/7 paramedic obligations.

Firefighters have been suspended, demoted, terminated, or have chosen to leave after raising operational concerns. **Leadership must be held to the same standard of accountability.** The effective dates on the resignations received this week are imminent. The **remaining staff of 5 total includes 2 members with less than one year of experience who are not yet paramedics**, and the senior captains who would normally train and mentor them are gone. The hiring and training pipeline is long. This situation cannot wait for further delay or further inadequate guidance from the same administration that created it.

This Council possesses explicit legal and procedural authority to act. Under **Section 13-10 of the City Charter**, the City Council has the power to inquire into the conduct of any department, office, or officer of the City and to make investigation as to municipal affairs. **Section 34 of the City Council Guidelines Policy (CP-10)** expressly preserves this authority, stating that the Guidelines *"in no way... limit the Council's ability to initiate investigations into municipal affairs in accordance with Section 13-10 of the Charter."*

Further, pursuant to **Section 33(c) of CP-10**, written complaints regarding the management of the City are required to be forwarded to the City Council for information, and the Council may request further investigation and report. Because these matters center directly on the City Manager and the Fire Chief, an independent, Council-initiated investigation is the only procedurally sound remedy.

I formally request that this Council exercise its authority under these guidelines to launch an independent investigation into the administrative decisions and workplace practices of the City Manager and Fire Chief. The investigation should examine.

1. The circumstances under which the original **\$15,000** study funding (and subsequent related expenditures exceeding **\$25,000**) was expended without the required intergovernmental buy-in, despite formal written opposition from key partners including MMR;
2. The pattern of employee separations and adverse actions resulting in **8 staff (6 Firefighters and 2 Captains) leaving since June 2024**, the reduction to a **staff of 5 (2 of whom are not yet paramedics)**, the squandered training investments, and the documented loss of confidence among personnel as stated in formal resignation correspondence;
3. Whether current and imminent staffing levels have triggered (or will trigger) the mandatory notifications required under **Michigan Administrative Code R 325.22116**, and whether the agency can sustain continuous 24/7 paramedic coverage;
4. Compliance with the Open Meetings Act in the conduct of the regionalization process;
5. The workplace climate that has driven out dedicated personnel; and
6. The overall administrative environment that contributed to the failure of the regionalization effort and the accumulation of municipal liability.

I further request that the Council place this matter on the agenda of its next regular meeting and direct a written response to this request within ten (10) business days.

Respectfully submitted for the public record,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John A. Dodson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John A. Dodson

Fire Chief (Ret.), Paramedic-I/C