

Paonia Board of Trustees,

I love the town of Paonia and have been an active member of this community since settling here over a decade ago. I have bought a home in Paonia, worked for local businesses, and volunteered with local non-profits. I have chosen to raise my children here. I care deeply for this town and long to see it prosper not only for myself but for future generations. With that in mind, I was delighted to accept a position working for the Town of Paonia in May of 2024. The town seemed to be making progress and improvements and I was excited to get involved and contribute. Unfortunately, this was not my experience working for the Town of Paonia. I had considered sending this letter much sooner to raise awareness among the Board of Trustees; however, I had submitted a case of wrongful termination to the Department of Labor and only recently received word from them that they were unable to allocate resources to an investigation.

Once I started for the Town, it became quickly apparent that the Town Hall office was a highly toxic work environment. I had hoped that some of that stemmed from the small staff being overloaded and that with the additional hires, things would level out and relieve some of that stress. Multiple employees indicated that this was the situation and that with the additional support Town Administrator Stefen Wynn and Town Clerk Samira Vetter were likely to become less stressed and more pleasant. These same employees stated that the Town Administrator's and the Town Clerk's moods varied greatly and advised me to avoid bringing new concerns, questions or inquiries from the public on "bad days". Due to the Town Administrator knowing me prior to being hired, I had several employees ask me to raise questions or issues with him, as he seemed to respond in a more positive manner. I had worked in many stressful environments before and I was optimistic that things would settle down. I did gently raise some of these concerns with the Town Administrator, who seemed to be unaware of how the staff and public viewed his behavior, and aware of the feelings regarding the Town Clerk but was unwilling to address either.

Things continued along in that manner for some time, with the Town Administrator increasing in hostility towards staff, and behind closed doors regarding board of trustees members, planning commission members, tree board members, and the public. All the while, the Town Administrator would not respond to certain questions, requests for direction or clarification, emails, and calls. Follow-up inquiries would be met with a dismissal and statements, in raised tones, regarding workload and priorities. Staff were frequently assigned tasks and then redirected to a "new priority" or "crisis," and then belittled for the first task not being completed "in time," though no time lines were given or clarification requests ignored. There was an incident regarding staff being moved between departments that was handled extremely unprofessionally, as were many discussions around water meters and billing. The degrading and horrible things I heard said about people serving on boards or living in town, good neighbors and members of this community, were astounding. I raised more than one argument in defense of the people and organizations in this town, which led to increased hostility directed at me both from the Town Administrator and the Town Clerk.

On September 15, 2025, multiple staff members approached me and stated that they and other employees were at the point of quitting if no one was willing to address the issue of the Town Administrator's behavior and lack of professionalism. Concerns raised to the Town Clerk, in her role as HR, were met with dismissals and statements of "he is the boss, so he can act how he wants, and we have to just deal with it". These employees debated writing a letter to Mayor Paige Smith or the board, but ultimately were unsure how to proceed and if there was a process for raising a staff issue to the board if HR refused to act. I was asked to reach out to Mayor Smith to ask what the correct process would be to make a complaint regarding the Town Administrator and the Town Clerk. I met with the Mayor regularly as part of the disbursement review and had the most direct working relationship with her. The hope was to not create more issues or hostility but to inquire what would be the proper method and channels for making a complaint.

On September 16, 2025, I was able to contact the Mayor. I stated that I was receiving inquiries as to the process for making a complaint involving the Town Administrator and the Town Clerk, and whether she was aware of what the proper method for making such a complaint would be? I had made inquiries of the Town Clerk in her capacity of HR in the past regarding the process listed in the employee handbook and had been told it was outdated and no longer valid. There was an employee handbook rewrite underway, but none of that had been shared or enacted. The Mayor said she needed to do a bit of research and would contact me with a response.

Later on September 16, 2025, the Mayor called me and started off by saying that since she was unsure of the process, she called the Town Administrator and the Town Clerk and told them I wanted to lodge a complaint against the Town Administrator. I immediately asked if she had directly told the Town Administrator my name and that I was lodging a complaint against him. The Mayor confirmed that she had. I immediately informed her of my concerns of retaliation from the Town Administrator and that it was unexpected and unprofessional that she would one, misrepresent my request for knowledge of a process as lodging a complaint and two, that she would share my name with the person she said I was making a complaint against. I stated that if she thought an employee was lodging a complaint or raising a concern regarding their direct supervisor, it was unprofessional to inform that supervisor before hearing the nature of the complaint, in case the complaint had contained accusations of violence, threats, or illegal actions. The Mayor seemed unconcerned with my statements. I then stated that the Town Administrator was my neighbor and my direct supervisor, and I had major concerns of retaliation. The Mayor stated that such things did not happen and could not happen in such a small town and such a small office. I was given the choice to drop the line of inquiry or to meet with the board members who would have been consulted under the outdated employee handbook, since there was no new process. The listed trustees were Rick Stelter and Kathy Swartz. Since Trustee Swartz was unavailable, the Mayor informed me she would be filling that spot. I was directed to inform the Mayor asap if I wished for such a meeting as she had already scheduled it for a few hours later in the day.

Later on September 16th, 2025, I called the Mayor back and said I had decided to go ahead with the meeting. The meeting was held within a few hours at Town Hall and was documented

and recorded. I stated that I had not asked to lodge a complaint but had asked what the complaint process was at the behest of several other employees. I suggested there be a clear process outlined and communicated to employees as soon as possible and that if asked I would relay my experience when simplifying making an inquiry as to the process. I also stated again that having my name immediately attached to a nonexistent complaint was upsetting.

My termination took place less than a month later, on October 9, 2025. During this time, the Town Administrator avoided and refused to speak with me other than absolutely required in which cases I was met with extreme hostility. Even during staff meetings, my department and I were singled out and criticized more than usual. His aggressive tone and demeanor towards me increased. My direct report, the Permit and Utility Coordinator, was also singled out and met with increased aggression beginning on September 17, 2025.

On September 18, 2025, two day after I talked with the Mayor, the Town Administrator and the Town Clerk informed me I needed to meet with them down the hall in one of the police department offices. The Town Administrator outlined an incident involving my direct report, the Permit and Utility Coordinator, and himself. He told me I was to write her up. I asked for the opportunity to ask her about the incident and to view the documents related to the incident as I felt that was my duty before issuing a write-up for an incident I had not witnessed. The Town Administrator pressured me to issue the write-up immediately, stating that I was being insubordinate and that “we might have an issue with your job” if I refused. I said I was simply following everything I had learned about write-ups and supervisory roles, and that it was customary to hear both sides and see documents involved before issuing a write-up. I stated that since the issue involved a document not being updated in a timely manner and that since we had experienced a number of issues with the Town’s OneDrive updating and different employees accessing different versions of documents it seemed likely that that and/or a communication misunderstanding might be at fault rather than the direct insubordination the Town Administrator was directing me to write-up the Permit and Utility Coordinator up for. The Town Administrator said he would issue the write-up himself and informed me I was not to speak to the Permit and Utility Coordinator or anyone else regarding the issue or to open or request the documents in question. He also indicated that he was unsure how to proceed with my “insubordination” but that it would be discussed and dealt with.

Later, I was informed that the HR consultant the Town had hired had been consulted about the matter and that the Town Administrator would not be making the write-up, but instead I would meet with the HR consultant and the Town Clerk regarding the matter. I attended this meeting, and the HR consultant launched into how to complete a write-up and started filling in the form as she went. She began asking specific questions. I stated I was unsure of the answers as I had not been allowed to view the documents, talk to the Permit and Utility Coordinator, or ask questions regarding the incident. The consultant was shocked and asked why I had not done so. I informed her of the direction from the Town Administrator. The consultant directed me to look into the matter, at the documents, and to speak to the Permit and Utility Coordinator about the incident. The Town Clerk stated that the Town Administrator had tasked her with the matter and removed himself at the guidance of the HR consultant, so I was to do as she said. Before

talking to the Permit and Utility Coordinator I researched how to restore versions etc. and went through the process on the documents in question and discovered that the OneDrive sync error did seem to be largely at fault and the Town Administrator and the Permit and Utility Coordinator had been working in different versions of the same document during the lagged syncing as the requested document changes had been made with the exception of one. I requested the Town Clerk to be present as I went through this process to corroborate my findings. I then spoke to the Permit and Utility Coordinator, who stated they had made the requested changes, with the exception of one that she was still awaiting clarification from the Town Administrator regarding. I brought these findings to the next meeting with the Town Clerk and the HR consultant and was informed that I still was expected to issue a write up for the the Permit and Utility Coordinator not informing the Town Administrator that the changes had been made in a timely manner and for the tone of voice used in her discussion of the matter with the Town Administrator and her need to seek additional clarification.

I expressed to the Permit and Utility Coordinator and to several other employees that I felt my job was directly threatened if I did not make this write-up and that I was being deliberately put in this situation by the Town Administrator as he expected me to become unprofessional or to not follow his direction and give him a cause for my dismissal. The employee I was directed to write-up, and I had been friends with since before she was transferred into my department earlier in the year by the Town Administrator. It all felt very aggressive and retaliatory, beginning mere days after the interaction with the Mayor.

The meetings with the Town Clerk and the HR consultant took place in late September and early October. On October 7th, 2025, I ultimately did issue a verbal warning to the Permit and Utility Coordinator, which was documented, directing her to use better methods for memory aids so as to eliminate the need for misunderstandings and seeking clarification. I issued the verbal warning out of fear for my job and my means for supporting my children. I greatly regret this action and do still feel I was in error for succumbing to pressure and threats to do so.

I was terminated on October 9th, 2025. Two days after issuing the write-up. My termination letter states I was an at-will employee terminated without cause.

October 15th, 2025, I requested a copy of my personnel file from the Town Clerk. I received several emails with the contents of my personal file on October 20th, 2025. I was shocked to discover the Town Administrator had made numerous additions on the dates of September 16th, and 18th, 2025. The date I asked the Mayor as to the process for making a report and the date the Town Administrator directed me to write up the Permit and Utility Coordinator without question. The additions were regarding a range of issues, most of which had never been discussed with me in any way. Some of these matters dated as far back as December 7th, 2024, but were not added to my personnel file until September 16th and 18th, 2025. I was never issued a verbal warning or a write-up while working for the Town of Paonia. Included in my personnel file is a memorandum from the Town Administrator regarding me covering multiple "issues" that were never discussed with me, some third hand information that was misstated and/or misleading and, simply put, one side of the story overblown. This memorandum contains

some half-truths and some direct lies. It seems abundantly clear that the Town Administrator hoped to build a case for my dismissal with cause by adding new-found issues to my personnel file and pressuring me to write up an undeserving co-worker and friend. Ultimately, the Town Administrator decided to terminate me without cause.

The Town posted a position for hire of Accounting and Payroll Specialist, encompassing the majority of my job duties, at the same pay, on October 10, 2025. The day after, I was terminated.

I wish my own experience while working for the Town of Paonia was an anomaly, that my interactions with the Town Administrator, Town Clerk and Mayor were unique, that the working environment improved with my departure. Unfortunately, following events with the Town has proven this not to be the case. Multiple other employees have been let go since myself and some have reached out to me with their own stories of mistreatment. These unprofessional actions and attitudes did not start nor end with my employment for the Town.

I believe one of the largest reasons the Board of Trustees has been largely unaware of the toxic office culture is due to the lack of accountability for the Town Administrator. The review process of the administrator position is conducted by the Board of Trustees, but lacks any peer review or other method to review conduct with staff and the public.

I love Paonia and living here, and truly desire the best for our town. I believe the Board of Trustees does as well. I would urge the Board of Trustees to take their oversight and accountability responsibilities seriously, to look into the matters I have mentioned as well as those made by other past and current employees, and to institute an updated review process. I would be happy to have a conversation with any of you who might want clarification or further details of my experience. Thank you for your time and service to our Town.

Kaja Bowman  
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