

Mayor, Councilmembers, and Councilmembers elect:

Since I am unable to adequately express my concerns in a manner that reflects what is expected of a City employee, and since requests for enhanced communication have been continually rebuffed, I have no option but to very regrettably tender my resignation effective at the close of business, November 19, 2024.

It has been a privilege for the last four years to work for the City of Punta Gorda and to be part of a team of dedicated, hard-working employees that have given of themselves in order to further the best interests of our beautiful City. When I came here to work and live, I thought I had found a place that was collegiate, engaged, and above the petty bickering and attempts to create chaos that is seen in many governments. I was wrong.

When I see a councilperson shake her head negatively and give a thumbs down in a public forum when talking about the future of a senior employee, that is simply unacceptable to me. I would not expect that of a duly elected councilmember, who also has me as a constituent in her District. It proved my point. We are all just people trying hard to do good things. The Council previously was collegiate and at least could disagree civilly when discussing issues. That ended last year when a period of contention and hostility, coupled with misinformation, disregard for staff, and blatant violation of Charter requirements began. It is very difficult for staff to work in an environment where all protocols, and the charter itself, is ignored and repeatedly violated without recourse. It undermines the chain of command and all authority. I will not be disrespected like that.

The negativity I have witnessed in the recent past by a select group, who are actually proud of the disruption that is causes and that their actions are condoned, is a black mark on our City. If that is something I am expected to ignore, not address to defend our staff and City, or that you want to have continue, then I should not be City Manager. Likewise, if I am not valued in this position because of that, as I have clearly seen, then it is time for someone else to take the stage that has been set and, if allowed, shine.

My goal has been simple, take Council direction and help improve the City operationally. It still is. I came here to do a job and help the City progress. If many that criticize would even have been here to see how this city was, maybe it would be easier to understand how far we have come. For example, there were Tupperware containers protecting elevator electronics from rain water, by necessity... but taxes were kept low...

We have not had one single normal year since I accepted this position, nor the luxury to improve as quickly as planned in the face of unprecedented cost increases and emergencies. Starting with CoVID19, then five hurricanes, three of which caused severe damage to the City and our infrastructure, severe disasters have impacted every plan in place. Yet we have made hundreds of accomplishments that every single employee of this City can be proud of. That has been shown on every evaluation, every

report. Hundreds. And that in the face of an employee base that was understaffed, underfunded, and underpaid. We changed all that.

While we are still not near the ultimate goals that we want to achieve, neither in project completion, new approved employees, nor regarding operational challenges, we have made substantial strides in our financial position and City strategic goals. Were it not for the intervention of the aforementioned emergencies, we would be much further ahead. At least we were able to get to year five of the initial five-year plan, still on track, and with a platform from which to work that could launch the City into the future. And were it not for our emergency response preparedness, first responders, and ability to adapt to the unexpected, we would be in much worse condition.

Regardless, the City will not move forward by default. It can easily come to a complete standstill. Not by action, but by inaction, the budget will not increase next year because of the millage rate calculation that will include the CRA assessable base. Not unless you as a group make more happen. Yes, everyone knows that, and has planned as such. That would actually be moving backwards. It took years to reverse that type of trend. That was the result of detailed planning in all aspects of governmental operations, and difficult decisions that were made to move forward. The results of not continuing to make those hard decisions will be evident in years to come when it is too late. That is the big picture on which you should be focused. Set the direction.

Telling us what we should be doing instead of asking if it has been done, or even if it is included in the long-range planning is a dangerous position to take. There is a reason that the City has a staff of professionals that knows what has been done, how we have improved, and where we still need to go. Demeaning their credibility by suggesting that many of the basic parameters haven't even been considered will demoralize staff. People simply don't know or care how much information is available or how much time and effort has gone into those plans, because the focus has been on trying to prove what hasn't been done, not how much has been accomplished. They don't pay attention to the work staff has completed, nor do they understand the limits within which we must work. i.e. see Tupperware example. All the comments are based on where we are and how terrible it is, not where we were and how far we have come. Yet no one has asked to sit down and actually discuss those plans and where it takes the City. If that is because the accomplishments don't fit some critics specific agendas to show no progress, then that is sad.

For me, my goal has been to continue working for the City to help those improvements happen. Imagine what we could accomplish with even one year of normal operations. I am 64 years old... on the 20th. I am too old to be bullied, and certainly don't need the health and personal issues that this job has caused in the last year. And as I said, I also will not be disrespected the way that some not only feel is okay, but allow and encourage. That is simply indicative of things to come. I am a professional, and proud of the accomplishments that our staff has made in the face of extraordinary circumstances. You should be too. I have had many substantial accomplishments in my career, but what staff has done here ranks among the top. That is because they started with essentially nothing, to get to a place almost impossible to reach.

My intent was to work at least another year for the City to help reach the goals. To make Council and staff successful. A five-year plan. I, too, believe that is a decision

for the new Council. I had originally negotiated lesser terms than even the prior City Manager, putting my faith in the City, and not knowing the unrealistic expectations that would be placed on the position given the events of the last four years. If Council wishes me to continue, then with a simple rescission we could work on mutually agreeable terms where no severance would be required at all. That was and could still be the plan if Council so chose. Any term Council feels appropriate for orderly transition is also possible, but that all takes communication, discussion, and mutual respect for agreement. One thing I cannot do, though, is allow my home, health care, transportation, and what is required to just be here, to be jeopardized. It takes too long to once again rebuild that. I didn't uproot my life to be here just to have it all taken away four years later based on a whim. There are other options as I have proffered, but that is, again, a Council decision. As I said previously, I am here to do a job, not play games.

Be proud of where we are now, not critical of where we need to go. It is unconscionable for people to take pride in trying to make the City look bad publicly, when so much work has gone into improving where we live, work, and play. This is a marathon, not a sprint.

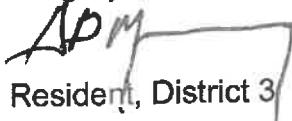
Additionally, we have already gained many employees, yet also lost some. All handled through HR professionals, studies, and implementation plans. The employee base is not a political football to be evaluated by simple exit interviews that only tells the written story someone wants on record. Again, an example of trying to create a crisis that is disruptive. But also again, highlighting the need to focus on the big picture and insure that assumptions are, and innuendo is, not used to prove points. Help build the City and our employees up. They deserve it.

We now have a stable work force of which we can be proud. We have Police Department squads fully staffed for the first time in recent history - the approved changes have made that happen. Fire contract negotiations and staffing has showed real progress. Even the general employee base is staffed more appropriately and are happily working with full benefits -- things it takes to run a city.

We have hundreds of millions of dollars of infrastructure projects in place, need more staff to make those happen, and yes, we have designated responsible parties. We have a solid financial plan. We have plans in place to continue to improve necessary services and operational parameters. We are in a good place with a good platform from which to continue the philosophy of continuous improvement. Everything else is detail that staff works hard to have well in hand. Use that, don't abuse it. Set the direction.

It has been a great privilege to work with the staff, Council, and citizens of the City of Punta Gorda. I wish you the best. I am always here for the City I love if you need me.

Gregory B. Murray



Resident, District 3

