

For immediate release
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Hudson City Manager intentionally limited Park Board's ability to seek citizen input on future of parks and recreation, and routinely skirts State open meetings law

HUDSON, OH – Public records released today on [The Hudson Files](#) show efforts by City Manager Jane Howington to interfere with the Park Board's efforts to get input from Hudson citizens about the use of parks, park programming and interest in a recreation center, circumventing State of Ohio open meeting requirements in the process. Both actions are apparent violations of the International City Manager Association's (ICMA's) [Code of Ethics](#), specifically those designed to encourage the public's confidence in and participation in their local government.

The public records published on The Hudson Files this week document email exchanges between Howington, Assistant City Manager Frank Comeriato, Jr., Assistant Public Works Director Trent Wash, several members of Hudson's Park Board, and former City Council Members Dennis Hanink and Alex Keleman. The emails provide insight into the Park Board's efforts to issue a survey to the citizens of Hudson regarding the future of Hudson's parks, and the City Administration's efforts to significantly limit the scope of the survey and the Park Board's advisory role to City Council.

On July 30, 2019, Howington, having reviewed the first draft of the Park Board's community survey, remarked:

"The survey does exactly what we don't want it to do. It asks if residents want a recreation facility but doesn't include what that would cost."

Over the course of the next several weeks, the emails document the process and direction that the Park Board would receive from Howington and certain members of Council. Ultimately, that meant striking any questions related to a potential recreation center or programming in Hudson's parks, despite the fact that the [City of Hudson's Charter](#) states that "conservation and recreational activities" are within the Park Board's purview.

In an email on September 20, 2019, Comeriato shared the direction he received from the City Manager and City Council regarding the survey:

"First, the City Manager and City Council have asked and have been clear that we do not include survey questions pertaining to a potential Community Recreation Center."

Comeriato further writes:

"Second, as we are all aware, the initial draft of the survey included several questions regarding parks programming of which virtually none pertained to the City's current parks operations or offerings. Those types of questions will also be taken out of the survey."

This direction has the effect of limiting the Park Board's advisory role to City Council and denying the citizens of Hudson the chance to weigh in on a full range of park use, including new programming desired by the community. In an email dated August 24, 2019, Park Board member Keith Smith requested a meeting with City Council to discuss these issues and wrote:

“Handcuffed again! While I appreciate the desire and need for an overall community survey, I’m growing weary of what I perceive as a decreasing amount of independence the Park Board has from council. We have been tasked to be an advisory board in Parks yet council is consistently attempting to ‘steer’ our process and thus becoming an influential factor in the opinion given by the board, whether we like it or not.”

Several Park Board members, including Brett Shriver, Tom King, Sean McGurr, Linda O’Neil and Douglas Colafella, concurred with the request to meet with City Council to discuss the matter. In an email on August 26, 2019, City Manager Jane Howington refused this request and instead suggested to Mr. Smith that the Park Board work through their Council Liaison. Smith subsequently resigned from the Park Board.

It appears that Howington and some members of City Council decided to limit the Park Board survey in a manner that allowed them to avoid public scrutiny and input as contemplated by Ohio’s open meeting laws. On June 3, 2019, Comeriato reminded Howington in an email that she wanted to discuss the Park Board survey in *“this Friday’s morning meeting”*. In a September 20, 2019 email, Howington describes the Friday morning meetings to former Council Member Hanink:

*“I believe all members of Council know there is a standing Friday morning meeting to review the agenda for the upcoming week before it gets published. I also believe members of Council know they can attend these sessions though **we try to keep the attendance under a quorum.**”*

According to the [state of Ohio’s open meeting laws](#), if a majority of council members are present at a meeting to discuss the public’s business, it must be open to the public and the public must be notified so that they can attend. Howington’s efforts to limit attendance by council members by default limits the points of view that can be heard in the meetings, and limits the public’s interaction with the City Council and those setting policy for the city.

Howington wrote in the September 20, 2019 email that she uses these meetings *“for input or suggestion on issues that may be coming up.”* This raises a number of questions, including: Which council members are able to give input at the meetings where the weekly agendas are discussed? Are these private meetings between the City Manager and a small group of council members serving the public interest, or are they used to set the agenda for the City without all points of view being represented, especially points of view that differ from those of the City staff and certain factions on City Council?

Former Council Member Alex Keleman questioned this practice, in the context of the efforts to limit the Park Board’s advice to City Council on the community survey. On September 25, 2019, Keleman wrote in an email:

*“The answer to ‘who said it’ is there is the memo sent by Trent [Wash, Assistant Public Works Director] on a Friday morning which says ‘her meeting with some Council members this morning.’ **It was the cabal setting the direction** as you probably surmised. Only difference between this decision and others (moving the City manager vote, etc.) is here we have it in writing.”*

In the emails, Howington, staff members Wash and Comeriato, and former Council Member Hanink intimate that the direction to strike questions about a potential community recreation center and park programming from the survey is so that residents don’t get “fatigue” from too many surveys, as well as the potential cost of a rec center. While these may be legitimate concerns, judging by the ICMA Code of Ethics, these concerns would be best addressed in open meetings, not in private, closed-door sessions between city staff and a few members of council where no quorum exists.

In light of these public records, Howington appears to violate [ICMA's Code of Ethics](#), including Tenet 3 which speaks to upholding the public's trust, and Tenet 4, "serving the best interests of the people", which states that ICMA "members should strive to eliminate barriers to public involvement in decisions, programs and services."

The full text of the emails referenced here, as well as others relating to the Park Board survey, can be found at thehudsonfiles.com. This website was developed by a coalition of community groups in Hudson to increase public awareness of (a) the manner in which the City Administration and long-serving city officials are operating, and (b) whether city policies and procedures are being adhered to, and to allow citizens to determine whether City officials' actions and decisions on city matters are in the best interests of the city and its citizens. Residents should check [The Hudson Files website](#) regularly for updates as they become available.

The Hudson Files is a joint project of the Hudson Community Coalition, a partnership of organizations seeking to advance civic engagement in Hudson on a variety of issues, and to promote open government "of the people, by the people and for the people". The Coalition's founding members include:

About Hudson Environmental Council: The purpose of the Hudson Environmental Council LLC is to promote and advocate for healthy land, air, and water for all who call Hudson their home. Our mission is to monitor and secure healthy and safe land use through research and advocacy for a clean and beautiful natural environment. Our belief is that any land use should be carefully considered with respect to its direct and indirect impact on the environment, both for the short term, and for the long term.

About Hudson's Voice: The purpose of Hudson's Voice, LLC is to promote and advance the common good and general welfare of the Hudson, Ohio Community through a social community movement designed to be an effective resource to the City and its City Council, by elevating and encouraging discourse regarding legislation, ballot initiatives, property development and/or other civic issues that affect the greater good of the citizens of Hudson.

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