Top Sheboygan officials lacked key details on police department sexual harassment probes

*Citizen oversight board was not involved in reviewing police investigation; mayor says he was unaware independent review ordered by city had been halted*

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SHEBOYGAN — Key city officials say they were left in the dark at various points during and after three 2021 internal investigations into sexual harassment by the Sheboygan Police Department.

The Sheboygan Press and Wisconsin Watch first [reported on the existence and results of the sexual harassment investigations](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2023/02/sexual-harassment-scandal-sheboygan-police-department/), which included discipline or verbal admonishments for a dozen officers on Feb. 6. The city also settled a discrimination complaint related to sexual harassment with a female officer for $110,000.

The police oversight board, a five-citizen commission that can decide to hear and act on complaints publicly, was out of the loop, former president Robert Lettre told the news outlets. The city also discontinued an external review of the police investigations that city leaders had initially agreed upon.

The state Department of Workforce Development (DWD) later found probable cause to believe recently fired city administrator Todd Wolf retaliated against former Human Resources Director Vicky Schneider over her concerns about how the investigations were handled. The finding advances the case to either a settlement agreement or an evidentiary hearing presided over by an administrative law judge.

Over the past few months, city leaders have been updating policies they hope will prevent future harassment and better respond to any future complaints as the fallout from those probes continues.

Bryan Pray, the officer who received the steepest penalty, a two-week unpaid suspension, resigned Feb. 8 — two days after the story was published and over a year after the conclusion of the internal probes. The investigations focused on misconduct including sharing semi-nude photos of co-workers without their knowledge or consent.

**Addressing police culture top priority**

Sheboygan’s new human resources director, Adam Westbrook, said the path forward includes improving the culture at the police department, in which “dark humor” and “inappropriate” statements and behavior were tolerated — a situation he noted is not unique to Sheboygan.

“There was a culture at the police department that allowed for that type of behavior to happen,” Westbrook said. “There has to be a shift that says ‘This is not OK.’ ”

“The second thing is rebuilding trust, and that’s what I’m trying to do. Because I feel like employees and police officers, whether rightfully or wrongfully, feel like if they report something, nothing is going to happen… (I) have been very clear that I want to know bad things that are happening so that I can address them.”

Moving forward, any allegation of harassment, discrimination or retaliation will be investigated separately by the human resources department and the police department, Westbrook said.

On Feb. 14, a citizen complaint was filed with the police department against Chief Christopher Domagalski, Capt. Kurt Zempel, recently promoted to assistant chief, and Capt. James Veeser for their handling of the original sexual harassment investigations, citing Wisconsin Watch and the Sheboygan Press’s reporting.

Two days later, Westbrook responded in writing that the complaint could not be investigated “based on the lack of information provided,” but the complainant could submit a new complaint to human resources with more detail or appeal to the Police and Fire Commission.

Investigation of a more recent complaint related to sexual harassment at the police department closed in February after investigators found it was not true and did not happen, Westbrook said.

**City launched external review, which never finished**

One step the city did take was to hire a law firm in July 2021 to investigate the police department’s handling of the allegations after Schneider raised concerns. But the review was discontinued when a female officer filed a sex discrimination complaint with the DWD.

That was news to Mayor Ryan Sorenson, who said he did not know the attorneys’ investigation was halted.

“I was trusting our team that this was being handled correctly and obviously best practices weren’t followed, so I was very upset by that,” he said. “I guess I fully don’t understand why it (the outside review) stopped.”

The mayor said he is not normally involved in personnel issues; after making the decision to hire outside attorneys, responsibility for the review passed to the human resources department, city administrator and city attorney’s office.

**City administrator alleged to have downplayed concerns**

Schneider, the former city human resources director, filed a complaint with the state Equal Rights Division in January 2022 against the city claiming discrimination. Schneider’s case, which is pending, alleged then-city administrator Wolf downplayed her concerns about the police department’s response to sexual harassment complaints.

Wolf instead “sought to discredit the female officers involved” and told Schneider not to get involved in the investigation or to inform the city council about the sexual harassment complaints, her attorney wrote in filings to the state DWD. James Macy, the attorney hired by the city to defend it against Schneider’s employment discrimination complaint, declined to comment further on the pending case but said no discrimination occurred.

Schneider took leave from November 2021 until March 2022, when the benefit ran out, [resigning in early June](https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23686462-vicky-schneider-resignation-letter).

In early January, [the council fired Wolf](https://www.sheboyganpress.com/story/news/local/2023/01/10/sheboygan-city-administrator-fired-and-residents-want-details-why/69792736007/), citing no reasons, after hearing additional, unrelated concerns about his conduct. The city has declined to release its preliminary investigation report but Sorenson told the Sheboygan Press that Wolf's actions as city administrator made the city vulnerable to lawsuits.

The city chose to fire Wolf without cause, rather than for cause, to save money and “minimize the negative impact on both Wolf and other city employees,” according to the city council resolution.

On Feb. 6, Wolf [sued 13 people](https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/2023/02/13/former-sheboygan-administer-sues-mayor-12-others-over-his-firing/69885385007/), including the mayor, city council members and Sheboygan Press reporter Maya Hilty, in connection with his firing, which he contends was unjustified.

**Police and Fire Commission not involved**

In 2021, Lettre, then-president of the Sheboygan Board of Police and Fire Commissioners, also raised concerns about the sexual harassment investigations.

The commission holds trial-like hearings on complaints filed against police officers, if concerns remain after those complaints are dealt with internally. Complaints can be filed with the commission by a member of the commission, the police chief or any aggrieved person.

The commission decides appropriate discipline for officers, including the chief of police, if the charges are sustained.

Lettre said a female officer contacted him in 2021 saying she had made a sexual harassment complaint that was inadequately addressed by the department. Lettre then met with the police chief, the mayor, city administrator and city attorney.

“It seemed like they were more interested in hiding the fact that there had been what was going on in the police department with sexual harassment … than really addressing the problem,” he said.

Lettre said he “never had a chance to pursue” the officer’s concerns because in the spring of 2022, he was removed from the commission.

According to Lettre, Sorenson told him in April that the police chief thought Lettre should not be reappointed at the end of his five-year term.

“I kind of laughed at him. I said, ‘What’s the police chief got to do with you reappointing?’ ” Lettre later told a reporter, saying that “goes against” the intent of the [state law](https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/statutes/statutes/62/i/13?view=section) establishing police and fire commissions to oversee police chiefs and departments.

Sorenson said the chief did not influence his decision but both the police and fire chiefs “gave some good perspective that kind of confirmed my decision.” Sorenson said he did not reappoint Lettre because he campaigned on making new appointments to city boards, and Lettre had already served 25 years on the commission.

While president of the commission, Lettre said he was not aware of the city’s external review of the police department’s investigation, although he “certainly” thinks the city should have informed him of that. He added that the commission knew “almost nothing” about the sexual harassment complaints at the department.

Andy Hopp, the current president, declined to discuss the department’s harassment investigations or the city’s external review, adding he cannot comment on matters discussed in closed session.

Hopp also declined to comment on whether the female officer’s allegations about supervisors and the chief of police failing to take her complaints seriously warrant further investigation.

**Police misconduct remained out of public view**

The police department redacted more than 70 pages of the reports obtained by the Sheboygan Press and Wisconsin Watch, along with the names of all but two of the 12 officers who were disciplined or verbally admonished.

Domagalski wrote that full disclosure would discourage officers from cooperating in future investigations and undermine the privacy of those who participated. He also wrote it would hinder the city’s ability to recruit and retain officers by causing a loss of morale and limiting their opportunities for “satisfying careers and fair treatment.”

Chuck Adams, the city attorney, initially said the city would not release the settlement agreement with the female officer but later provided it.

Employment attorney Nola Cross, who was not involved in the investigations or complaints, said efforts by a city to hide what happens with public money is a violation of public trust.

Additionally, anyone contemplating applying to the Sheboygan Police Department should “easily” be able to know the department’s record on sexual harassment, such how many settlements there have been and how many complaints have been filed, Cross said.

“That’s one of the reasons there’s so much pervasive sexual harassment … in non-traditional female positions,” she said. “It doesn’t see the light of day. There’s no sunlight on these cases.”

*This is a collaboration by the Sheboygan Press and the nonprofit Wisconsin Watch, (*[*www.WisconsinWatch.org*](http://www.wisconsinwatch.org/)*), which collaborates with WPR, PBS Wisconsin, other news media and the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Journalism and Mass Communication. All works created, published, posted or disseminated by Wisconsin Watch do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of UW-Madison or any of its affiliates.*