



Reflector-Chronicle

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Abilene City Commission amends city manager contract

Considers street maintenance projects

By Ed Boice

Abilene Reflector-Chronicle

The Abilene City Commission had an eventful regular meeting April 14. Other than City Commissioner John Kollhoff's actions (featured in the Tuesday, April 22 edition), the commission approved an amendment to the city manager's agreement and considered street maintenance projects the Public Works Department wants to do this year.

Public comments

Kollhoff took the podium to again ask for the resignation of City Manager Ron Marsh.

"We are plagued by the incompetence of our city manager and the complicity of a city commission that seems determined to shield him from accountability. I stand before you today, seemingly as the lone voice of the commission, demanding change, and I will not be silenced," Kollhoff said.

He stated the city missed out on tens of thousands of dollars because Marsh failed to file paperwork for the rural housing incentive district on the Golden Belt Heights.

He also said Marsh failed to properly budget for the 14th Street Industrial Park project since the Kansas Legislature approved the grant in 2024 before the city finalized their 2025 budget.

He ended his comments by asking the public to call for the resignation of Marsh.

Tony Frieze, fireworks seller, asked the commission to allow fireworks to be fired off the night of July 5 again this year — the same as in 2024.

John Kready of Kready's Fireworks also supported selling and shooting fireworks on July 5.

Marsh said the city will present the commission with a recommendation after staff has studied the recent changes

in state law.

Proclamation

Brandon Rein, city mayor, read a proclamation for Arbor Day which is April 14.

"Whereas, trees in our city increase property values, enhance the vitality and beauty of our community, and provide an inviting environment for visitors and whereas, the National Arbor Day Foundation has recognized the City of Abilene as a Tree City USA for the past 33 years and desires to continue tree planting and care," Rein said.

Business Items

The commission approved the bid of \$45,187 from Holm Automotive for a new pickup truck for the water treatment plant. The city chose the Holm bid over the low bid of \$44,675 from Valor Automotive because Holm is a local business. Kollhoff voted no without giving any reason.

The commission then voted 2-1 to approve an amended and restated city manager agreement.

Aaron Martin, city attorney, said the agreement is the same except for one major and a few minor changes. The major change was that, instead of a quarterly review, the commission will call for a review when they deem necessary. The agreement still includes the annual review.

Kollhoff requested the item be moved to a study session since this is the first time the item has appeared publicly in a meeting, two of the commission members were not present (Wendy Miller and Amy Meysenberg) and a relatively small number of people were in attendance.

Kollhoff also called the most recent quarterly review between the commission and city manager "a joke." Kollhoff revealed that at one point he left the review because of the commission's lack of preparation. Rein in response said the commission usually did not make any formal preparations and just discussed.

Before the vote, Commissioner Trevor Witt said the commission came to a general consensus about the agreement during the quarterly review after Kollhoff had left.

Kollhoff then accused Witt and the

rest of the commission of potentially breaking executive session statutes for coming to a general consensus during the review. The quarterly review is held in an executive session.

"You can reach consensus in an executive session. You have a misunderstanding of what executive session is for," Witt said to Kollhoff.

At the end of the commission's study session, Witt confirmed with Attorney Martin that the commission can come to a consensus in an executive session as long as it pertains to the topic the commission went into executive session for.

With Rein and Witt voting yes, Kollhoff voted "hell no" because he saw the major change as a decrease in oversight.

Kollhoff, in protest, left the meeting in the middle of a vote to approve issuing \$9.15 million in bonds. The money would be used for the 2025-2026 City Connecting Link Improvement Program (CCLIP) Buckeye Avenue project, the 14th Street Industrial Park project, and the construction of new sports fields. The outcome of the vote is to be determined.

Study session

The commission approved an amendment to the city's boards and committee's ordinance. The amendment features some slight changes and striking of some words.

The commission then reviewed a report of all the trees in Abilene from the Kansas Forest Service.

Anderson then presented proposals for 2025 street maintenance projects. Anderson said the department planned projects so that each quadrant in the city benefitted from at least one.

Below are the street maintenance projects proposed:

— Two inch mill and overlay on NW Third Street from the west end of Mud Creek Bridge to the BNSF railroad tracks near Washington Street. The project is estimated to cost \$174,092.

— Micro-surfacing NW Fourth Street, NE Fourth Street, NE Third Street, S Cedar Street, NE 10th Street, Hilltop Drive, Summit Drive, Spruceway Street, NW 16th Street and Charles Road for about \$202,868.55.

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Reflector-Chronicle file photo

Abilene City Finance Director Leann Johnson has stepped down from her position for a new job with Kansas State University. The city currently has not hired a replacement.

Abilene director of finance steps down

By Ed Boice

Abilene Reflector-Chronicle

The city of Abilene's finance director is stepping down. Leann Johnson has worked in the role for over two years. After six years with the city in total, she is now moving onto a finance position at Kansas State University. She will leave the city on Friday, April 25.

"Truly I have loved it. My heart has always been kind of in finance and with accounting even though I kind of had a lot of my background in court and away from finance."

The finance director position allowed Johnson to transition from municipal court to finances. She said finances has always been a passion of hers. Accepting the position at K-State continues her career path in that field and reconnects her with the university she graduated from.

"It's been a dream come true, all of it," Johnson said. "Working here, working with all of staff, I do love the finance director position. I just felt like I had an opportunity I could not let go."

Johnson thanks the Abilene City Commission and Ron Marsh, city manager, for her time as finance director.

While in her role, Johnson set up new finance software that is more user-friendly compared to the city's previous software and overall saves city staff time. She also led the project to design and build a new t-hanger at the Abilene Municipal Airport.

"I felt very accomplished to move those projects through in the last couple of years. It took a lot of work and a lot of things I didn't know and a lot of things I learned, but I feel like I've had a lot of accomplishments here," Johnson said. "I feel like I'm leaving the city better than when I started, and that's always kind of my goal, to leave something better than what I came to."

Marsh said the city has not found a replacement for Johnson.

"Well, it hurts. It's bittersweet, I would say," Marsh said. "I'm extremely pleased and proud of her for what she has accomplished and moving on."

Leavenworth could become immigration detention hub

By Zane Irwin

Kansas News Service

LEAVENWORTH — Nestled into the crook of a wooded two-lane highway on the edge of northeast Kansas, a complex of concrete and barbed wire sits mostly vacant — for now.

For over a decade, the Leavenworth Detention Center held federal inmates awaiting trial.

But that chapter closed in 2021, when then-President Joe Biden signed an executive order that caused many federal contracts with private prisons to expire.

Now CoreCivic, one of the country's largest private corrections companies, wants to reopen the more than 1,000 bed complex in Leavenworth as an immigrant detention center.

The dormant facility would adopt a new name, the Midwest Regional Reception Center, and a new mission: to boost regional capacity for

President Donald Trump's push to deport millions of people in the country without legal status.

But a lawsuit stands in the way of CoreCivic's proposal. Under local ordinance, the city of Leavenworth argues CoreCivic needs to follow a formal process to receive permission before it can reactivate. The company insists those rules don't apply to them because, in their view, the facility never closed.

On the surface, it's a mundane matter of statutory interpretation. But for the groups who oppose CoreCivic's plan to reopen the detention center, it's a fight to protect their immigrant neighbors and keep traumatic memories of the troubled prison firmly buried in the past.

"How do you think they're going to act?"

Former corrections officer William Rogers remembers where he was when an inmate slashed his head open

with a blow from a metal lunch tray.

Squinting into the sunlight, he pointed at a slate-gray building scored with tall, narrow windows. Behind that same unbreakable glass in 2018, he said, an inmate started to threaten a case counselor.

"Man, I'll hit a woman. Don't think I won't," Rogers recalls the inmate saying.

He reported those threats and started to transfer the inmate to a different unit. That's when the man decided to take his anger out on Rogers instead.

"When he hit me in the back of the head — I mean, it hurt. But I didn't know it was split open," he said. "Because at that point you're just going to fight."

Rogers finished his shift that day with 14 staples in his head.

That was one of three instances in Rogers' four years at the facility when an inmate assault sent him to

the emergency room. Despite the violence he and his colleagues endured, Rogers doesn't place all the blame on inmates who lashed out.

He said understaffing created unbearable conditions for detainees. Coveted recreation hours dwindled without enough officers to run them. The same problem arose for staff that helped set up phone calls, manage commissary money and provide basic needs like clothing.

"They're just in that pot all day brewing," Rogers said. "How do you think they're going to act?"

A 2017 audit of the facility by the U.S. Department of Justice found that chronic understaffing by CoreCivic, coupled with poor oversight by the U.S. Marshals Service, created dangerous conditions for inmates and staff.

At one point, according to that report, nearly a quarter of the facility's jobs sat vacant. Recently-hired staff were assigned to fill roles they weren't trained for. Staff put three inmates in

cells designed for two — and then tried to cover that up. Entire units went unsupervised.

Chapters of the American Civil Liberties Union from around the region made more explicit accusations about the facility in a 2021 letter urging the White House to ensure its closure.

"Stabbings, suicides, and even homicide have occurred with alarming frequency in the last year, with weapons, drugs, and other contraband now a common occurrence," the letter said.

It continued, "food has been restricted, contact with legal counsel and family denied or curtailed, medical care is limited, and showers are infrequent because the facility is too unsafe."

In an email to the Kansas News Service, CoreCivic spokesperson Ryan Gustin acknowledged that the facility faced security challenges in the past. But he said most issues with safety and staffing were concentrated during an 18-month period coinciding with the pandemic.

Gustin said CoreCivic has learned from those challenges and plans to ensure a secure environment with a more stable job market.

"At any of our facilities, including MRRC, we don't cut corners on care, staff or training, which meets, and in many cases exceeds, our government partners' standards," he said.

CoreCivic's defense

While activists and community members repeat allegations about the facility and the U.S. immigration system, CoreCivic and its supporters put forward arguments of their own.

In email records Rogers obtained via an open records request, CoreCivic made a number of promises to city officials about how the facility would benefit the community.

The company said reactivating the facility would create 300 well-paying jobs and bring in millions of dollars in property tax revenue and

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Weather Watch Record

Today's forecast high — 73
Today's forecast low — 54
Wednesday's high — 76
Overnight low — 59
Precipitation — 0.32
2025 precipitation — 39.39
Sunset Thurs. — 8:13 p.m.
Sunrise Fri. — 6:12 a.m.



Friday

High: 63
Low: 50
Cloudy



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