

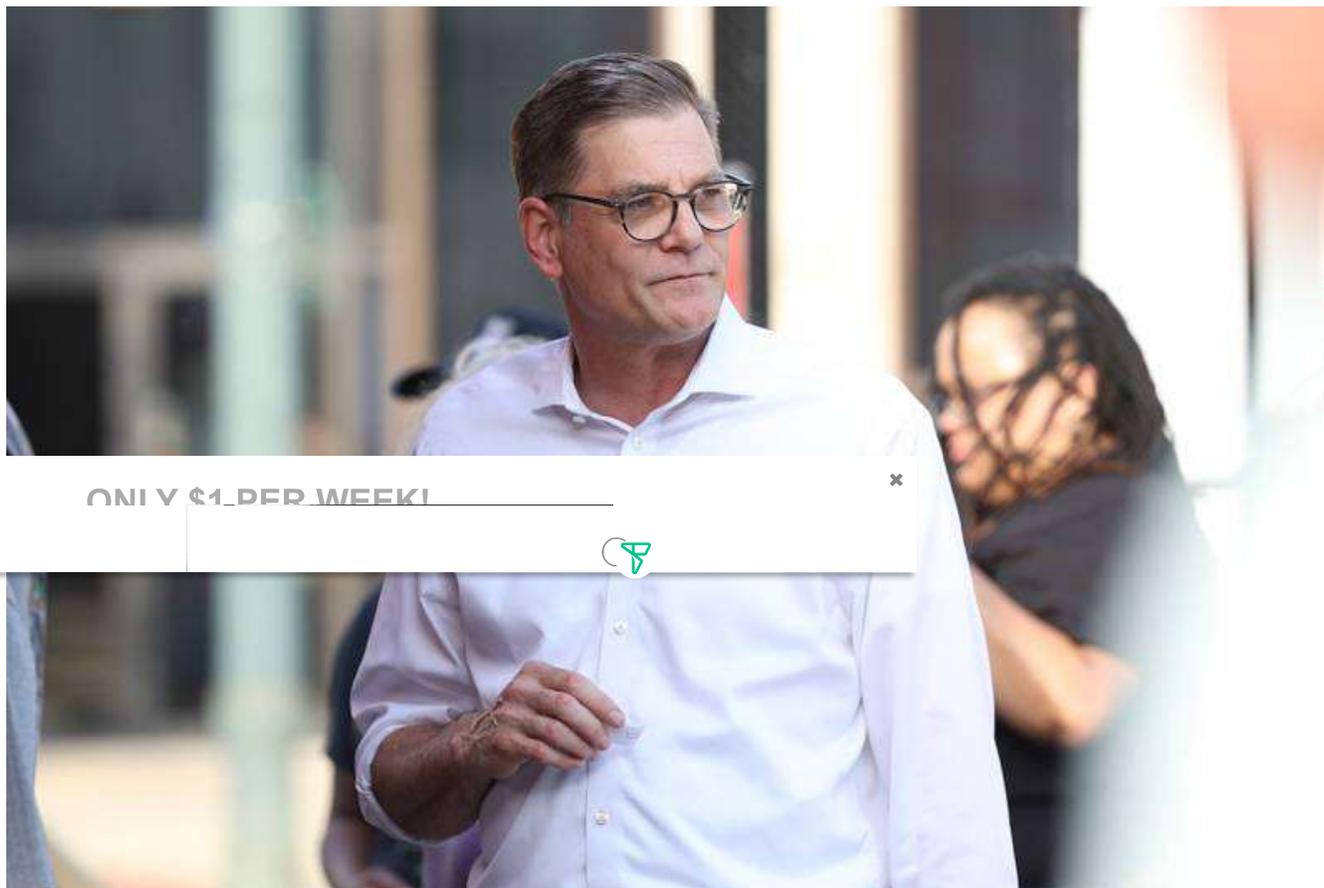


Joliet city manager takes heat over asylum-seeker grant

City Council discusses declaring Joliet a non-sanctuary city

By Bob Okon

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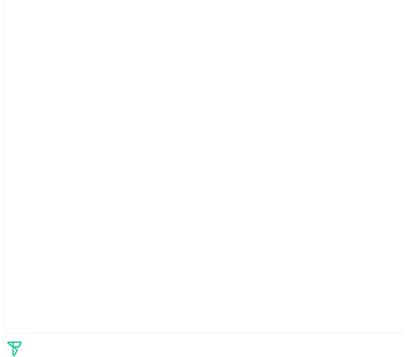


Interim City Manager Rod Tonelli (Gary Middendorf – gmiddendorf@shawmedia/Gary Middendorf)

October 17, 2023 at 8:00 am CDT

Interim City Manager Rod Tonelli came under fire at a [Joliet City Council](#) meeting on Monday as questions continue to swirl around an \$8.6 million asylum-seeker grant even after it has been abandoned.

Councilwoman Jan Quillman accused Tonelli of a coverup, and council members discussed whether [Joliet](#) should declare itself a non-sanctuary city.



Joliet Township, a separate unit of government from the city of Joliet, announced Friday that it was dropping its application for the grant amid public opposition, some of it coming from City Hall.

But a few council members have questioned whether city staff had a bigger role in pursuing the grant than has been acknowledged.

Quillman accused interim Tonelli of both not speaking up sooner about what happened and covering it up when he did.



“We can’t depend on him to tell the truth,” Quillman said of Tonelli, who was sitting close by. “He comes up with coverup after coverup after coverup.”

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Councilwoman Jan Quillman (Gary Middendorf – gmiddendorf@shawmedia/Gary Middendorf)

Tonelli responded immediately.

“I have spoken nothing but the truth, and I’m offended that you would say otherwise,” he said to Quillman.

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Quillman’s accusation came after Tonelli spoke at length about the grant application pursued by Joliet Township.

Tonelli said that while he had mentioned the grant opportunity to Township Supervisor Angel Contreras during a discussion about migrant issues in the city, neither he nor city staff were involved in applying for it.

He said a Sept. 1 meeting at City Hall that included city staff, Contreras, and the two local organizations that were to benefit from the grant – the Spanish Community Center and the Will-Grundy Medical Clinic – was “a general discussion about asylum seekers in the community” and issues that could come up with the winter approaching.



Tonelli said the same kind of meeting happened around the same time in 2022.

Tonelli pointed to a number of city emails that have come out through requests under the Freedom of Information Act and said, “None of it has shown any evidence that there was any staff involvement in what the township chose to file in that grant application.”

He said city staff was not aware of the scope of the grant that Joliet Township would pursue.



Unlike a Joliet Township Board meeting last week that attracted 350 people as public comment on the grant application stretched for three hours, one person came to the Monday council meeting to comment on the grant.





A Joliet Township Board meeting last week was moved to the theater at Billie Limacher Bicentennial Park to accommodate the 350 people who showed up for a public discussion on the township's application for an \$8.6 million grant to provide services for asylum-seekers. (Gary Middendorf/Gary Middendorf)

But resident Gianna Barone's comments, which included criticism of Tonelli and questions about the city's involvement in the grant, sparked the lengthy discussion on the matter.

"Is it going to be shoved under the rug and forgotten?" Barone asked. "The people of Joliet want answers."

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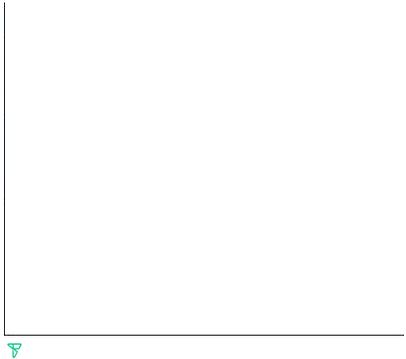
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"We're going to definitely look into this," Mayor Terry D'Arcy said. "This will not end."

Councilman Larry Hug asked whether Kristi McNichol, a housing finance specialist with the city who was involved in the Sept. 1 meeting and emails related to asylum-seekers, would be brought to the council for questions.

Council members discussed whether Joliet should take action to make clear it is not a sanctuary city. Joliet has never declared itself a sanctuary city, but Councilman Joe Clement suggested that was not enough.



“I think the first step the city has to take is let everybody know we are not a sanctuary city,” Clement said. “We need to pass an ordinance.”

D’Arcy said he was willing to consider it.

But Councilman Cesar Cardenas said declaring Joliet a non-sanctuary city was going too far.

“I know there is a lot of fear surrounding migrants and immigrants currently,” Cardenas said. “I don’t think we should officially say it. I think we need to be careful.”

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Bob Okon

Bob Okon covers local government for The Herald-News



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