

Key West city commissioners discuss grand jury report

Specific plan coming in response to jury recommendations

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Key West city commissioners on May 7 heard public comment

on the most recent grand jury report before spending about 45 minutes discussing the findings with input from the city attorney and city manager.

The discussion ended with a plan to bring specific recommendations to the next meeting for a formal vote.

The agenda item focused

on the findings of the second Monroe County grand jury report issued within the past year. The report said the city has made progress but still faces structural and procedural problems in its planning, building and code enforcement systems.

Jurors cited concerns with the city's organizational structure,

confusing land development regulations and the handling of Planning Board and variance applications. Among the recommendations were the creation of citizen-led committees to review staffing and building regulations.

Commissioners discussed the findings with City Attorney

Mayanne Downs, who said many of the recommendations either conflict with state law or are already required under the city charter and state statutes.

Commissioners reached a consensus to track progress on

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actionable items using a formalized template. Commissioner Sam Kaufman said he would work with Downs to identify specific recommendations for consideration at the June 4 meeting.

Downs said she would work with Kaufman to draft selected grand jury recommendations into resolution form for formal commission consideration. She added that many recommendations are already in place or mandated by law, including public decision-making requirements and ongoing code updates based on legislative and case law changes.

Downs also said the city's strong-manager form of government places operational oversight under the city manager, while the commission establishes policy direction, in accordance with the city charter. She said the city manager's ongoing analysis and reporting efforts indicate the city is in "full compliance" with the overarching policy goals

outlined in the report.

Kaufman emphasized the seriousness of receiving a second grand jury report in a relatively short period and said the commission should formally consider the recommendations as part of restoring public trust. He requested that all recommendations be placed on a future agenda so commissioners could vote on whether to adopt them.

Vice Mayor Donie Lee said the report did not allege corruption and argued that while some recommendations were practical, others were unrealistic, including a suggestion to resolve land development regulation inconsistencies within 60 days. Lee said land development review should remain in the hands of professionals and that operational efficiency is the responsibility of city management and commissioners, not advisory groups.

City Manager Brian L. Barroso said code improvement efforts are ongoing and include pursuing an artificial

intelligence platform to improve and secure the city's review process technology.

Downs also addressed the report's recommendation to prohibit ex parte communication, saying such a restriction would violate state law and constitutional protections.

She explained that the city's representative form of government establishes the Planning Board with community members, who are supported by the city attorney's office and growth management staff through training and legal guidance.

"You have a very robust group of people some of whom have served for years," Downs said. "And our office trains them every time they come on board ... you have a really strong group of citizens who actively participate and continue to serve and we give you legal support and your management gives you operational direction."

Downs said the city is

generally in compliance with the grand jury's recommendations except for suggestions prohibited by law or those requiring changes to the city's form of government through a charter review process, which she noted can be costly.

Commissioner Monica Haskell requested that the city use the same tracking template created in response to the first grand jury report to monitor progress on current recommendations. Downs and Barroso agreed to prepare a progress chart after the commission formally adopts specific recommendations.

As the discussion wrapped up, Commissioner Aaron Castillo criticized the amount of commission time devoted to the grand jury reports. Castillo said the city had already moved beyond many of the issues identified in earlier reports because of changes in management and increased transparency.

"When is all this going

to stop at these city commission meetings? We are not the grand jury. We are not John Q public. We are city commissioners doing the will of the people," Castillo said.

"I'm tired of this. Let's come up here and do city commission business. Let's please the people ... I chaired boards for over 30 years, and I've never seen a clown show like this. This is a clown show! We come

up here every time to just sit up here and just throw stuff back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. I don't see anything getting done."

The commission then moved on to the next agenda item.

A video of the entire meeting and the minutes is available on the City website at <https://www.cityofkeywest-fl.gov/>

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