



Council Agenda Item

Meeting Date:	July 21, 2026
Agenda Item:	Memo on Ethics Complaint by Brad Ceranske.
Staff Contact (name, email, phone):	Steven T. Chesebro, schesebro@whitewater-wi.gov , 262-458-2780

BACKGROUND

(Enter the who, what, when, where, why)

The City of Whitewater Ordinance Chapter 7.04 provides a code of ethics for the various officials and employees of the City. Under that chapter the ethics board is created via Section 7.04.090. A copy of that section is attached to this memo for reference. The Section does provide the process by which the Ethics Board reviews complaints. Under the ordinance the Ethics Board is to be comprised of 5 members plus one alternate. Unfortunately, at the time the ethics complaint came in one member had left without being replaced and another refused to respond or attend any meetings. This left the ethics committee with only 4 active members. Typically, in this situation a recommendation would be made to appoint two new members. However, prior to the need for the additional appointment arising, a secondary ethics complaint was made against the City Manager. As the City Manager is partially responsible for appointing Ethics Board Members it was determined that while their complaint was pending no new board members would be recommended for appointment to avoid even the appearance of bias on the part of the Ethics Board.

Of the four active members two believed they had conflicts regarding the complaint and therefore abstained from the review of the complaint dated February 3, 2026. This left only two members able to review and potentially act on the complaint. Section 7.04.090 does specifically address what is to happen if there are insufficient votes due to abstaining specifically Section 7.04.090(e) provides “If the board is unable to come to a conclusion on the subject of probable cause, due to abstentions or the voting of “present,” the board shall have further discussion and vote again. If the stalemate continues, the board shall treat it as a dismissal and proceed as in subsection (d) of this section.” This is exactly what occurred in regards to the complaint dated February 3, 2026. It should be noted that even if this provision was modified, due to the time the complaint addresses and the time the complaint was followed, this matter would need to follow the current version of the ordinances.

It should also be noted for the Common Council that the Ethics Code and Chapter 7.04 is not the only method the City has for addressing inappropriate behavior by various official or employees. The Employee handbook and Wisconsin Statutes as well as other City Ordinances provide a number of other methods by which the City is able to address behavior deemed inappropriate. For example, Wis. Stat. Ch. 17 addresses removals of public officials. It permits appointed officials to be removed by the appointing officer or committee or by the Common Council for cause. It also provides for removal of elective officers by recall or by the Common Council for cause. Currently the Common Council has opted to utilize the Ethics Board as a method of vetting a situation and making a recommendation on if there is cause for the Common Council to remove an individual.

In addition, the Ethics Board is currently reviewing Chapter 7.04 in order to determine if any recommendation should be made to modify that code. Once that review is complete it will be forwarded to the Common Council for further consideration and recommendation. If the Common Council wants to provide specific direction in how they should modify the Ethics Code those recommendations would be helpful.

PREVIOUS ACTIONS – COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

(Dates, committees, action taken)

At the June 2, 2026 Common Council Meeting a member of the public indicated that the Ethics Committee took no action due to conflicts and the lack of a quorum on a matter. Common Council Members requested that they be advised of the situation.

On February 3, 2026, the City received an ethics complaint filed by Brad Ceranske, and against Thayer Coburn as a member of the CDA and possibly others within the CDA.

On February 17, 2026, the Ethics Committee meet and took no official action. Due to the ordinance no action by the ethics committee lead to an investigation being completed on the allegations.

On May 7, 2026, the Ethics Committee reviewed the investigatory findings into the alleged Ethics Code violations by Respondent Thayer Coburn as alleged by Brad Ceranske and again took no action.

On May 28, 2026, the Ethic Committee adopted a Memo as its formal findings and dismissal of this ethics complaint filed February 3, 2026.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

(If none, state N/A)

None

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

At this time no action is recommended regarding the ethics complaint dated February 3, 2026. Providing additional direction to the Ethics Board regarding revising the Ethics Code would be beneficial to assist them in making recommendations for amending that section.
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ATTACHMENT(S) INCLUDED

(If none, state N/A)

1. Whitewater Ordinance Section 7.04.090 Duties of Ethics Board.
2. Ethics Memo of Resolution of Ethics Complaint Dated 5/28/26