



**CITY OF NEW HAVEN
BOARD OF ALDERS**

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April 7, 2014

Honorable Jorge Perez
President, New Haven Board of Aldermen

Dear President Perez,

Pursuant to Section 48 "Guidelines for Aldermanic Conduct" of the Rules of the Board of Alders, I'm respectfully asking that you please review 19th Ward Alder Michael A. Stratton's behavior in relation to the specified Aldermanic conduct guidelines. Consistent with the Board's Rules, I am transmitting this for you to review and take all appropriate steps to ensure that the legislative body properly handles this situation, and prevails upon Alder Stratton to immediately cease and desist from engaging further in such grossly inappropriate actions.

From the outset, I would like to emphasize that there is nothing personal involved here. Alder Stratton is entitled and fully encouraged to ask questions and express his opinions at any and all meetings, including of course, voicing disagreements and differing perspectives. This has nothing whatsoever to do with the arguments he makes or the content of his discourse. This only has to do with his inappropriate conduct, and his pattern of making personal attacks, demeaning remarks and threats to colleagues. In fact, a lively debate is the basis of our democratic process and essential to doing the best job of representing our constituents and being an effective, responsive and transparent legislative body. However, it is of paramount concern that this be done in an atmosphere of respect and courtesy through civil and honorable discourse which is worthy of the important work of this body and the citizens of New Haven who have elected us.

My primary intent is to ensure that the disorderly behavior, including aggressive confrontation, insulting, personal attacks and intimidation exhibited by my colleague on several occasions while engaged in Board business is not tolerated and never repeated again. I would also like to add that as Deputy Majority Leader, and as a colleague, and a fellow member of the Finance Committee, I have reached out to Alder Stratton several times by email and also in direct conversation, to offer some instruction and training in appropriate aldermanic conduct. However, in each of these well-meaning instances, Alder Stratton has disregarded and derided my suggestions.

I believe that Alder Stratton has flagrantly violated several subsections of Section 48 "Guidelines for Aldermanic Conduct" on multiple occasions. Alder Stratton has defied subsection A which states that a member of the Board shall: "refrain from speaking or acting, by oneself or in concert with others, in a manner which disturbs, obstructs or interferes in any way with the performance of another member's sworn legislative duties." He has violated subsection B which states that a member shall "fully cooperate in both word, action and spirit with the will of the Board and the Committee in making all efforts to see that the meeting is conducted in a civil, decent and respectful way that brings honor to the body and allows it to conduct its business in a courteous, efficient, parliamentary manner."

Alder Stratton has disregarded subsection C which states that a member “only speak when recognized by the presiding officer, shall be germane and confine remarks strictly to the matter under debate, shall follow the rules of discourse as stated in the existing Rules of the Board, and shall promptly cease any and all debate of a matter when such debate has been concluded and the matter has been disposed of by the body.” He has defied subsection D which stipulates that a member shall “acknowledge and obey all directives and minor reprimands made or upheld by the President or Committee Chair as a ‘point of order,’ and shall abide without further discussion or complaint after losing an appeal to the full Board or Committee.”

In addition, Alder Stratton has violated subsection F which states that a member shall “show the utmost courtesy and respect to other colleagues and staff, as well as to all witnesses and members of the public in attendance.” He has defied subsection G, which states that a member shall “not act in such a way as to inflict or in any way cause physical harm or to threaten bodily harm or any type of retribution or intimidation through use of menacing language or action.” Alder Stratton has violated subsection H which says that a member shall “not engage in violent, tumultuous, threatening or deceitful or fraudulent language or behavior.”

The Alder has also disobeyed subsection I which maintains that a member shall “not cast personal insults, racial or religious epithets or any other derogatory remark, slur or falsehood which in any way attempts to impugn the character, personality or motives of a colleague.” He has transgressed subsection J which states that a member shall “not speak in abusive, improper or obscene language or make any obscene or improper gesture,” and he has violated subsection K, which says that a member shall “not make unreasonable noise or by intention distract or harass another.”

In particular, from my vantage point, Alder Stratton’s behavior was most inappropriate during the Finance Committee meetings of March 6 and March 31. At the March 6 meeting, for instance, Alder Stratton tried to seize the floor at the outset of the Finance Committee meeting to speak about his budget proposals. When Finance Chair Andrea Jackson-Brooks declined that request in order to proceed with the meeting agenda, Alder Stratton defied the ruling of the chair and continued to speak. Chair Jackson-Brooks stated that his behavior was “disrespectful” and asked him to “Please do not do this again.” However, Alder Stratton did not apologize, accept the ruling of the Chair and move on, instead he angrily answered “Don’t say ‘sir’ to me and I can’t respond.” He continued: “I ask for a point of personal privilege and you denied it,” as if that was justification for his continuing to speak out of order.

At the recent March 31 Finance Committee meeting, Alder Stratton again repeated this pattern of unruly, insulting and disturbing behavior. Following a comment by Alder Perez on a budget issue, he addressed Alder Perez and the Committee: “You should be embarrassed! It’s disgusting.” This was a deeply disturbing comment which impugned the character and motives of the members of the Committee. In this case, Alder Stratton improperly castigated other Board members because they did not agree entirely with a proposal he had made.

After Chair Jackson-Brooks adjourned the meeting, Alder Stratton got up from the table pointed his finger angrily at the Chair and stated: “You’ve been living off the core government, that’s what you’ve been doing.” The Chair asked: “I’ve been doing what?” He repeated: “You’ve been living off core government.” The Chair responded: “What are you accusing me of?” Alder Stratton responded: “I said, you have been living in the middle of core government for your entire life, you’ve been part of it.” The Chair said: “You don’t know what I’ve been doing my entire life.” The Chair went on to warn Alder Stratton to “be careful” about making such charges.

At this point, someone on the Committee yelled out: “Come on, time to go home.” Alder Stratton now came back down the aisle to the Committee table saying in response to the Chair: “Be careful.” An understandably very upset Chair said that she was “not going to take the accusations he made” and threatened to hire a lawyer. Since Alder Stratton was angrily shouting and was again standing at the Committee table in a menacing way in what I believed to pose an aggressive threat, as Deputy Majority Leader I tried to do what I could to bring this episode to a peaceful conclusion. I said to him: “She’s the Chair; you should just walk away. You’re not going to win this.” Alder Stratton raised his hand to quiet me and said: “No I shouldn’t just walk away. This is democracy. This is a democracy. I’m not trying to win.” He was still at the table in a threatening way, so I repeated: “Just cut this off Michael. Just walk away. Just walk away.” At that point, he did leave down the aisle. Before he left the Aldermanic Chamber, Alder Stratton circled back again to threaten me and the Committee, saying: “We’ll see who has the better argument in 2015.”

As a member of the Finance Committee, I truly appreciate listening to a wide range of differing opinions from my colleagues while discussing matters of finance; priorities will not always be the same. In addition, I believe that opposing viewpoints provide good healthy conversations which lead to the making of better public policy. However, the personal attacks cannot be tolerated. Again, the problem is not the content, it is the conduct. Democracy does not involve berating your colleagues for not agreeing with your position. It also does not involve insulting, demeaning and threatening colleagues who do not see issues exactly the way you see them.

In my opinion, the behavior of Alder Stratton, particularly at the Finance Committee meeting on March 31 was totally out-of-order and unworthy of a member of the New Haven Board of Alders. I believe that his conduct was highly inappropriate and in violation of Section 48 of Board Rules, "Guidelines for Aldermanic Conduct." He was highly disturbing and obstructive of the operations of the Board. He did not conduct himself in a civil, decent and respectful way. He did not show proper courtesy and respect to other colleagues. He threatened harm and intimidation through threatening language and action. Worst of all, he cast personal insults and derogatory remarks in attempting to impugn the character and motives of the Chair, as well as of the entire Committee. His charge against the Chair was an abhorrent personal slur with racial overtones, which no member of this Board should ever have to endure again.

In addition, I believe that a consistent pattern of behavior has emerged from Alder Stratton in which he gives the impression that he feels that he does not have to abide by the Board's rules of appropriate Aldermanic conduct. Alder Stratton's behavior has been wholly unacceptable and intolerable and has had the effect of lowering the overall tone and civility of public discourse in this city. I believe that it has empowered the public to feel as if yelling and being disrespectful at our public budget hearings is part of the democratic process. I have never experienced this type of disrespect from a Board member (or from the public) and I strongly believe that the Board has to take a stand in sending a message that this kind of behavior is unacceptable and must stop right here and right now.

Going forward, I would respectfully recommend that you consider asking Alder Stratton to do the following:

1. Issue a written apology that is publicly (verbally) addressed to Ms. Andrea Jackson-Brooks and the entire Finance Committee.
2. Sign an agreement stipulating that he will strictly adhere to the Rules of the Board of Alders, Section 48, "Guidelines for Aldermanic Conduct."
3. Agree that if he yells at colleagues or the public or uses derogatory language, before, during or after a meeting is called to order or violates any other provision of Section 48, he is to be immediately dismissed from the meeting by the Chair and he will voluntarily resign as a voting member of the Finance Committee.
4. If after such an incident, he does not voluntary resign from the Finance Committee, the Board President shall consider means of removing him from that Committee.

Democracy thrives in a climate of lively debate, and give-and-take, but Alder Stratton has repeatedly crossed the line in a virtually unprecedented way. Again, I encourage and welcome Ald. Stratton to continue to express himself, whether I agree with him or not, but just not in a manner that is verbally insulting and threatening to me and other colleagues. If continued, his repeated outbursts threaten to undermine and obstruct the Board's ability to effectively carry out its legislative duties on behalf of the citizens of New Haven. It poses a threat to the health of this institution, as well as to the health of those who give so much of their time and energy to serve this city.

Thank you very much for your consideration of this very serious matter.

Sincerely, 

JEANETTE L. MORRISON
Deputy Majority Leader, Alder, 22nd Ward

cc: Members, New Haven Board of Alders