

City council sets powers and duties of city administrator

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At the annual Austin City Council retreat in January, Council Member Marian Clennon asked the council, "When are we going to start working as a team?"

Not yet, apparently.

A resolution granting powers and duties of the city administrator sparked about a 30-minute discussion and created division between council members at Monday's meeting.

The heated discussion centered on the wording of the resolution giving the city administrator the authority to manage, direct and supervise city employees. It was an action "clarifying the chain of command for department heads," said Mayor Tom Stiehm.

Clennon said employees from all but one city department have come to her complaining "about issues with the city administrator," she said. Employees tell her not to take items to the council because of repercussions, she said.

"I have all of these complaints that have been brought to me, and I can't bring them to the council because employees are afraid of retaliation," Clennon said.

If that's the case, employees need to go to their supervisor first and then consult a union, said Council Member Judy Enright. The first step should be going somewhere other than Clennon, Enright said.

"I'm just saying that you cause a lot of problems," Enright said. "And I'm getting tired of it."

She said Clennon pushes and pushes and pushes, and then sticks up for one department only, so she can't be objective when dealing with that department.

"And it is making it harder for all of us to work together," Enright said. "And I think that you have got to start working together with the rest of us as a team."

Department employees and unions come to her about issues, Clennon said, and when she does recommend the chain of command, "they're afraid of the retaliation."

The duties and authority of the position were discussed by the council at a recent performance evaluation of City Administrator Jim Hurm. The council oversees the city through the city administrator because it is not the role of the council to be involved in the day-to-day operations of the city, Human Resources Director Tricia Wiechmann wrote in a memo to the mayor and city council.

Council Member Steve King initially brought up the wording issue with the resolution Monday. He pointed out the part about the city administrator being granted authority to manage, direct and supervise city employees either directly or through department heads. "Either directly or" seemed strong, he said, and his idea was to cross those words out.

"It was about the chain of command for me," King said. "It just seemed a little aggressive to me when I first read it."

Clennon agreed with King and thought the wording would allow the city administrator to step over department heads. She was also concerned that it could be confusing to employees. Would they report to their department heads or to Hurm?

The resolution was approved as written on a 5-2 vote, with Clennon and King voting against it.