

Two Lometa police officers resign, citing ‘hostile work conditions’

BY MASON HINES
DISPATCH RECORD

Two Lometa police officers have submitted their resignations.

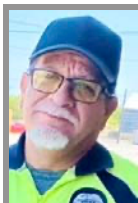
Officers Jesus Cerda and Raymond Lazard have not worked since Sept. 3 and

Sept. 17, respectively.

Both cited “hostile work conditions” as the reason for their resignations.

Accord-

ing to City Secretary Lindsey



Jesus Cerda



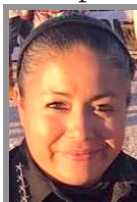
Raymond Lazard

Grant, Cerda mentioned an incident with Councilman Doug Brister as the ultimate reason for their separation from the police department. Details were not provided.

Grant told the Dispatch Record that Chief of Police Melissa Cantu has not hired any replace-

ments, however reserve officer Sixto Rocha III – who has been with the city since Oct. 25, 2018 – was promoted to full-time status.

His promotion was effective Sept. 21.



Melissa Cantu

As of press time Thursday, the two police positions available are a full-time listing and a part-time listing. Applications can be made through the Texas Municipal League website

Budget and tax rate details are on page 12.

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Lometa City Council addresses personnel concerns

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(tml.careerwebsite.com/jobs/) and by searching Lometa, Texas.

Interested parties also can apply in person at Lometa City Hall.

There is no deadline to apply, as the positions will remain open until they are filled.

The resignations, along with other personnel issues and policies, were discussed by the Lometa City Council during its regular meeting Monday.

City officials considered changes to City Hall's operating hours and the use of squad cars for police officers.

City Attorney Arthur Bryan reminded the council of a decision from a prior meeting that limits certain uses of police vehicles and said there would need to be an official change before any action could be taken.

Councilman James Dickison said the council "should discuss the handbook from front to back ... work through it, get it up to date, how it should be."

"It should be our policy that [all city] employees are handed a copy [of the policy], and sign off on it before they start work," Dickison said.

Dickison also noted that use of the police cars are currently part of an officer's stipend.

The recently approved budget allots \$186,758 for law enforcement, with the current hourly salary being \$15.50, for both full- and part-time officers.

No action was taken on Cerda's and Lazard's resignations, but other personnel issues arose at Monday's meeting.

After the council concluded an executive session on personnel matters, maintenance technician Alex Witherspoon recounted to the council his work experience that also included a negative encounter with elected officials.

Witherspoon was hired in July.

Witherspoon said "a city council member has targeted me to the point I feel uncomfortable and scrutinized. I was informed that a city council member gave an employee [instructions] to record information on my locations, conversations, duties performed, and any mistakes [I] might make and to return it to that member."

Witherspoon cited his love for the community and hard work as an employee, and

asked for clarification on why he was being targeted.

He named the council members he felt harassed by as Brister and Marsha Laughlin.

Laughlin expressed her concern over the allegation.

"If you feel I'm harassing you in any way, I do not agree with that," she said, and listed issues she has had in the past with Witherspoon that she said were "warranted."

At Monday's meeting, Brister did not offer comments about concerns with city personnel. Correspondence from the Dispatch Record to Brister — seeking comments about the personnel matters — did not yield a response from Brister by press time.

The city attorney recommended the council take care of its current human resource issues, which include the reported incident between Cerda and Brister, as well as the alleged harassment of Witherspoon.

Bryan's recommendation passed unanimously.

CITY HALL PROBLEMS

The council also discussed changing the lunch hour policy for city secretaries, with better public transparency on when City Hall would be closed.

Laughlin made a motion to close City Hall from 1-2 p.m. daily, which passed with a unanimous vote.

Laughlin then expressed concerns over foot traffic within City Hall — an item she had requested appear on the agenda for Monday's meeting.

"This should be treated like a business, and we don't need more foot traffic," the councilwoman said.

The city secretary said some space could be for "authorized personnel only, which she [Laughlin] has discretion to give that authorization."

Tensions rose as the discussion continued.

"What will someone who's not from here think about Lometa?" Laughlin said. "How will they feel since we're lax?"

Council members inquired how citizens would be removed from unauthorized areas.

Laughlin cited a "lack of structure" that she wanted to raise concerns about.

No action was taken, but the City Hall policies will be addressed during the restructuring of the city employee handbook.

The next council meeting is scheduled for Nov. 1 at 7 p.m.