

AI Summary: Ft. White, FL - Qualified Town Manager Joe Helfenberger Resigns Amid Ongoing Chaos Under Mayor George Thomas

Longtime local government professional Joe Helfenberger resigned as Town Manager/Clerk on June 26, 2026, just months after being recruited to stabilize the small town. His departure continues a pattern of dysfunction that began after George Thomas, who had no prior local government experience, was elected mayor in November 2024. The town has cycled through multiple town clerks, four attorneys, and repeated office crises since Thomas took office.

Previous clerks resigned in quick succession, leaving office manager Kelly MacPherson and Mayor Thomas to run day-to-day operations — actions that exceeded the mayor's authority under the Town Charter. Council meetings became chaotic, with the mayor reportedly walking out of one session, causing the town attorney to quit. Applications for clerk yielded no qualified candidates until Councilman Lonnie Harrell recruited Helfenberger, a former Lake City City Manager with decades of experience, in March 2026.

Helfenberger encountered challenges from the start. The mayor sabotaged his application by adding unauthorized information, refused to sign his council-approved contract, and continued interfering in operations. The office was in disarray when he arrived, with "records not filed, signatures not attested... minutes months and months behind, and general office disarray."

Tensions peaked on June 25 in an altercation between Helfenberger and Mayor Thomas. Anonymous officials described Helfenberger as visibly frightened. One reported: **"If the mayor comes into town hall today, I'm gonna have to leave and go run an errand or something... I don't wanna have any contact with him."** Another said Helfenberger was "shook up" and repeatedly stated, **"This mayor's gotta go, this mayor's gotta go."** A third official warned, **"But really, it's to the point now somebody's gonna get hurt. That's my concern."**

Former Councilman James Richardson, speaking on the record, said he visited to offer support and "almost cried" while begging Helfenberger to stay. A special Town Council meeting is scheduled for July 7, 2026, to address the resignation, hiring a replacement, and future staffing plans. The article questions whether the mayor will attend, whether Helfenberger might reconsider under better conditions, and whether the council will finally address the mayor's conduct.