

Total Recall

Fall River Mayor Flanagan faces potential recall, after promoting Michael Coogan, a man facing charges in Rhode Island for allegations of doing business as an unlicensed contractor

Fall River Mayor William Flanagan won his first re-election bid by a comfortable margin in November, after admitting during the campaign he had made some mistakes in his first term. The 30-something mayor vowed to make up for them if voters gave him another term.



And they did, by a 10-point margin.

Within weeks of the polls closing, though, Flanagan made a highly-controversial promotion and then fired the veteran city planner for what many believe were political reasons.

Enter Robert Camara and Daniel Robillarid, who were so upset by what they saw have launched what will be the city's first recall of a mayor if successful.

"My phone's been ringing off the hook with people wanting to get involved, wanting to sign petitions, wanting to know what they can do to help," said Robert Camara, a 38-year veteran of the city's Fire Department who retired two years ago. "Many people who've called me have said they voted for him based on his assertion he'd learned from his mistakes and he was going to do better in his second term. Then, within eight days of his reelection, before he was even sworn in, he made the Coogan appointment."

"Coogan" is Michael Coogan, a lieutenant and former president of the firefighters union, who The Hummel Report first investigated in the fall of 2009 when he was running for a state Senate seat. Coogan now faces criminal charges from the Rhode Island Attorney General's office for working as an unlicensed contractor in Barrington — and ignoring a civil judgment against him.

But what incensed many was Flanagan's decision to oust veteran Fire Chief Paul Ford and replace him on an interim basis with Coogan — a strong political supporter — and bypassing more than a dozen others, who Camara says were more qualified.

It caused an uproar within the department where some firefighters openly worried about Coogan's ability to manage the large-scaled fires Fall River sees periodically.

"You need experience in order to make decisions," Camara said. "Many people don't understand that you have seconds to make life-and-death decisions at a fire scene. Fire chiefs stand in front of a building and have literally seconds to make decisions about a structure they've never seen before in their life."

Last month, Flanagan did an about-face, demoting Coogan back to lieutenant, saying there were questions about Coogan's documentation of time he spent doing union business on city time. It is something Camara said the mayor knew about already, and in fact had approved, but used as an excuse to throw Coogan under the bus because he had become such a huge a liability for Flanagan.

So what does Mayor Flanagan have to say about all of this?

The Hummel Report has left repeated messages seeking comment with no response. It is a turnaround from last fall, when Flanagan readily sat down with us to answer questions about work the city did around a waterfront building (Commonwealth Landing) being developed by one of the mayor's chief campaign contributors.

It is that development, though, that led to a second controversy. Flanagan, last month, fired veteran City Planner James Hartnett. Camara said Hartnett made some decisions the mayor didn't like, including several unfavorable to the developers at Commonwealth Landing. Now Hartnett finds himself out of a job — replaced by someone with no planning experience who got a hefty pay raise.

It was Hartnett who also told The Hummel Report, in response to an inquiry from us, that the city was going to spend more than the \$250,000 the mayor said was committed to infrastructure improvements surrounding Commonwealth Landing, something that didn't sit well with Flanagan.

"I haven't heard one person say he did a poor job." Camara said. "That's why he remained in there for 20 years. Everybody said he was a very good director of planning."

Last month, Flanagan, in an effort to reach out to Camara and Robillard, convened what he called a 'beer summit' at a local restaurant to talk about their concerns. Camara said it did nothing to change his mind.

The recall effort has hit some resistance at City Hall, where Camara and Robillard have been told there is a 90-day waiting period from the time the mayor is sworn in before they can file for a recall petition. They are waiting for a legal opinion.

"But, once that's all said and done we'll have to collect signatures from 5 percent of the registered voters — about 2,600 — and if we get it to that level then it goes on the ballot," Robillard said.

"Let's let this thing run its course." Camara said. "Let us get the people. If we don't get the signatures, they can laugh all the way to the (mayor's office). If we do get the signatures, we'll see. The people have spoken and that's what this country is all about."

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