Monroe County Legislature

VICE PRESIDENT
MERCEDES VAZQUEZ SIMMONS AND
LEGISLATOR
RACHEL BARNHART

May 22, 2024

Via Electronic Mail
President Yversha Roman
Monroe County Legislature
County Office Building
39 W. Main St.
Rochester, NY 14614

President Roman,

We owe the people of Monroe County an honest and capable government. We thank you for your service to our community, but we believe you are on the wrong course to deliver on this important promise.

When faced with mismanagement at best, and corruption at worst, good leaders hit the pause button and seek to investigate. They make course corrections. They admit when they're at fault. They inform the public every step of the way.

Unfortunately, you have done none of those things in the wake of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) scandal, nor have you demanded such from the Bello administration. Worse, you have asked us to do the opposite of what good governance requires, and you appear motivated by your political and personal ties.

Your May 20 letter indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of legislators and the media, as well as basic principles of public integrity.

Your letter was filled with vague accusations of hurting nonprofits and "vulnerable residents," and our "irresponsible" behavior. You complained about how we use our public platforms and the media as tools for transparency and accountability. You seem to think that exposing corruption hurts the victims of corruption.

While you never said so, we know you're referring to our vote against a new fiscal sponsor for the Neighborhood Collaborative Project. We shared our serious concerns about this project in a16-page brief more than a month in advance of the vote, and you never followed up with us or even asked us how we would vote.

These concerns about the Neighborhood Collaborative Project included no-bid, inflated contracts to companies, a lack of deliverables, conflicts of interests and even potential extortion, all of which we have reason to believe is currently under investigation by federal authorities.

There was no way we could approve more tax dollars to this project, and we did our jobs by informing the community of the reasons behind our position. The question is not why we voted the way we did, but why you didn't join us. We know why: at least one nonprofit head is your close political ally, as is the assistant county executive. You also have a family member on the board of one of the nonprofits. Continuing to put your own interests ahead of our obligations to the public has compromised your judgment and threatened your ability to remain president.

Because the Neighborhood Collaborative Project was voted down, we now have $6 million to spend on anti-poverty efforts, and you have not put forth a single proposal on how to move forward. In contrast, *we* gave you a way forward, but you have not pursued any discussion about our suggestions.

Furthermore, we have repeatedly asked how many ARPA dollars are remaining, and you have not shared any steps with us to obtain this information. Nor have you sought to develop a plan for remaining funds, which must be obligated by the end of the year.

Instead, you blame us for your failures of leadership, which include allowing the Bello administration to choose which caucus members can receive briefings about missing ARPA money.

You did make one specific allegation in your letter, which was saying it was "bad journalism" to assist an asylum-seeker in exposing her alleged poor treatment by the agency managing her case. That agency's leadership is made up of your political allies. You falsely claimed the story harmed the asylum-seeker and put her in danger. She *sought out help to tell her story*; she wasn't used or stripped of her agency.

Perhaps the most troubling line of your communication said, "To continue to make the public skeptical of organizations and individuals, while doing so under the guise of transparent governing is irresponsible."

Let's be clear: the skepticism from the public is warranted, and it's not because of anything we've done. It's because of mismanagement of the ARPA program, both by those involved with the Neighborhood Collaborative Project and County Executive Adam Bello's administration. It would be irresponsible *not* to tell the public exactly what is going on.

We have done our job as legislators, which is shining a light on truth and asking for accountability and transparency. For months, we have requested that urgent needs related to poverty be addressed. Meantime, you refused to support legislation for rental subsidies and a $10 million housing fund, and you voted to transfer funds from human services to be spent on golf courses. You did all these things while introducing nothing to help the people you claim we're hurting.

We are alarmed to be explaining to the President of the Legislature that a healthy democracy requires allowing elected officials to speak to reporters without fear of retaliation, and that a free and robust press be allowed to monitor our work. We will continue to do our jobs in the exact same manner. We suggest you stop advocating for the Bello administration and your political allies and start advocating for all your members and the people we serve. Otherwise, we will not hesitate to vote in favor of any motion to vacate your office and start over with a Democrat who has a better grasp on civics, ethics, and good government.

Sincerely,

Mercedes Vazquez Simmons
Vice President

Rachel Barnhart
Legislator – District 17

cc: Democratic Caucus