

Ethics review sought over Holyoke councilor's conduct during DUI stop

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HOLYOKE — Holyoke's two police unions are calling for At-Large City Councilor Israel Rivera to sit out decisions involving the department, citing his recent DUI [arrest](#) and remarks they say threaten public trust.

The unions, representing patrol officers and supervisors, on Tuesday asked city officials for an ethics opinion on whether Rivera's participation in police staffing, funding, oversight and votes violates standards of impartiality.

The unions want the city to remove Rivera from the role of chair of the City Council's public safety subcommittee and prevent him from weighing in on department matters. Ethics rules say even the appearance of bias — whether or not it's proven — can be enough to have an elected official step aside from decision-making to preserve public trust, the unions said in the letter to city officials.

Their letter cites statements Rivera allegedly made during his Dec. 21 arrest — threatening budget cuts and using offensive language — as evidence of potential bias and a breach of public trust.

The unions seek written advice on whether Rivera's role in police matters creates a real or apparent conflict of interest.

City Council President Tessa Murphy-Romboletti could not be reached Tuesday for comment.

Police Chief Brian Keenan directed questions to Mayor Joshua A. Garcia, who said the union's concerns about Rivera's personal matters should be addressed by state officials or the union's lawyers.

"Either way, however, I can confidently say Councilor Rivera's personal situation has no bearing on the daily operations of the Holyoke Police Department and the incredible work they are doing under the direction of Chief Keenan," he said.

Garcia said Keenan has held supervisors accountable for their shifts, built strong task force partnerships, cracked down on open-air drug dealing, prioritized training, strengthened community ties, and carried out a plan to make public parks safer.

"The results have delivered what the public has been expecting as we navigate improving the quality-of-life concerns for Holyokers," Garcia said. He added that overdoses are down 18%, illegal gun seizures are up 111%, motor vehicle citations have risen 143%, and arrests are up 36%, all while cutting overtime by more than 30% from January 2025 to January 2026.

Garcia said Rivera's personal matters do not affect the daily operations or effectiveness of the police department.

"Our department remains committed to its mission, and under Chief Keenan's leadership we continue to make measurable progress in community safety," he said.

He encourages the union to seek the appropriate legal or governmental guidance and said he appreciated ongoing support while the city and department work together to serve and protect community.

The move by the unions came after Rivera was [sworn in](#) Monday as the City Council's vice president, a new position. Rivera said he would not comment on the letter because of his ongoing court case.

In a Facebook [post](#) in December, Rivera said he ran his campaign on transparency, and that commitment had "not changed."

He said he understands the seriousness of the DUI matter and acknowledged the concerns people may have. He said he respects the legal process and plans to try to rebuild public trust in his civic service.

Union concerns

Union concerns stem from official reports and public accounts that describe what they term a "concerning interaction" between Rivera and state police.

According to a criminal complaint, State Trooper Daniel Harpin Jr. spotted a brown Buick LeSabre traveling at 40 mph in a 25-mph zone on Appleton Street in Holyoke around midnight early Dec. 21.

The criminal complaint says Rivera ran a red light at Appleton and Maple streets and then drove onto a paved sidewalk past Nick Cosmos Way, which was blocked by barricades, cones and a "bridge closed" sign.

The criminal complaint says officers smelled alcohol on Rivera, who told them he drove onto the sidewalk because "he had nowhere else to go."

He was arrested after failing a sobriety test, the complaint said.

According to the unions and the criminal complaint, body camera footage and the official report indicate Rivera allegedly threatened to cut the Holyoke police budget and used offensive language during and after his arrest.

Comments by Rivera cited by the unions included: "I'm a city councilor. You can't really work with me, and that's fine. I'll just cut the budget," and "Everyone gets a pass, but I don't."

The unions also said Rivera's use of racial slurs during the incident, was "deeply troubling and inconsistent with principles of diversity, equity and inclusion."

Rivera is due in court Jan. 26 for a pretrial hearing on an operating under the influence charge. He pleaded not guilty at his arraignment in Holyoke District Court in December.

If convicted of the misdemeanor, he could spend more than 100 days in jail. Rivera also received civil citations for failing to stop or yield and for speeding.

The unions' letter says that no matter how the case ends, Rivera's alleged comments — if true — suggest bias or hostility toward police.

If true, the remarks hurt trust in city leaders — especially in a diverse city like Holyoke, where officials are expected to uphold these values, the letter said.

Potential impact on governance

Lt. Andrew DiNapoli, president of the supervisors' union, told The Republican the unions have not spoken to Rivera directly and only sent letters and emails to city officials.

The unions are giving the city seven to 10 business days to respond, which they believe is enough time, he said.

He said if the unions do not hear back, they may convene a press conference. "Hopefully it doesn't get to that point," DiNapoli said.

The situation could affect coming budget talks with the city. "That's why we're a little concerned with the comments that the councilor made during his arrest," he said.

"He should not be voting in any way, shape or form on any matter that has to do with the police department going forward, that's ultimately what we're asking for," DiNapoli said.

Rivera's racial remarks during his arrest, he said, were "not a good look for the city or for himself."

DiNapoli noted that Rivera was arrested by state police, not Holyoke officers, and at the time talked about cutting the Holyoke Police Department's budget. "That shows how intoxicated he might have been," DiNapoli said.

Earlier criminal case

Rivera's DUI arrest last month followed a conviction in 2009.

At the time he was sentenced to five years in state prison after a guilty plea to felony firearms and drug charges and assault on a police officer.

Since his release, Rivera has been outspoken about the circumstances that led to conviction, gun violence, what he has called "over-policing" in Black and brown communities.

DiNapoli said Rivera's previous comments show he's "not a big fan" of law enforcement. "We realize that he's not an ally to the police department,"

"The city deserves better," DiNapoli said. "We can't have city councilors trying to use their political clout to gain favors from the police department. It's just a black cloud over the city when something like this happens."