

Embattled Holyoke councilor booted off public safety panel after OUI arrest

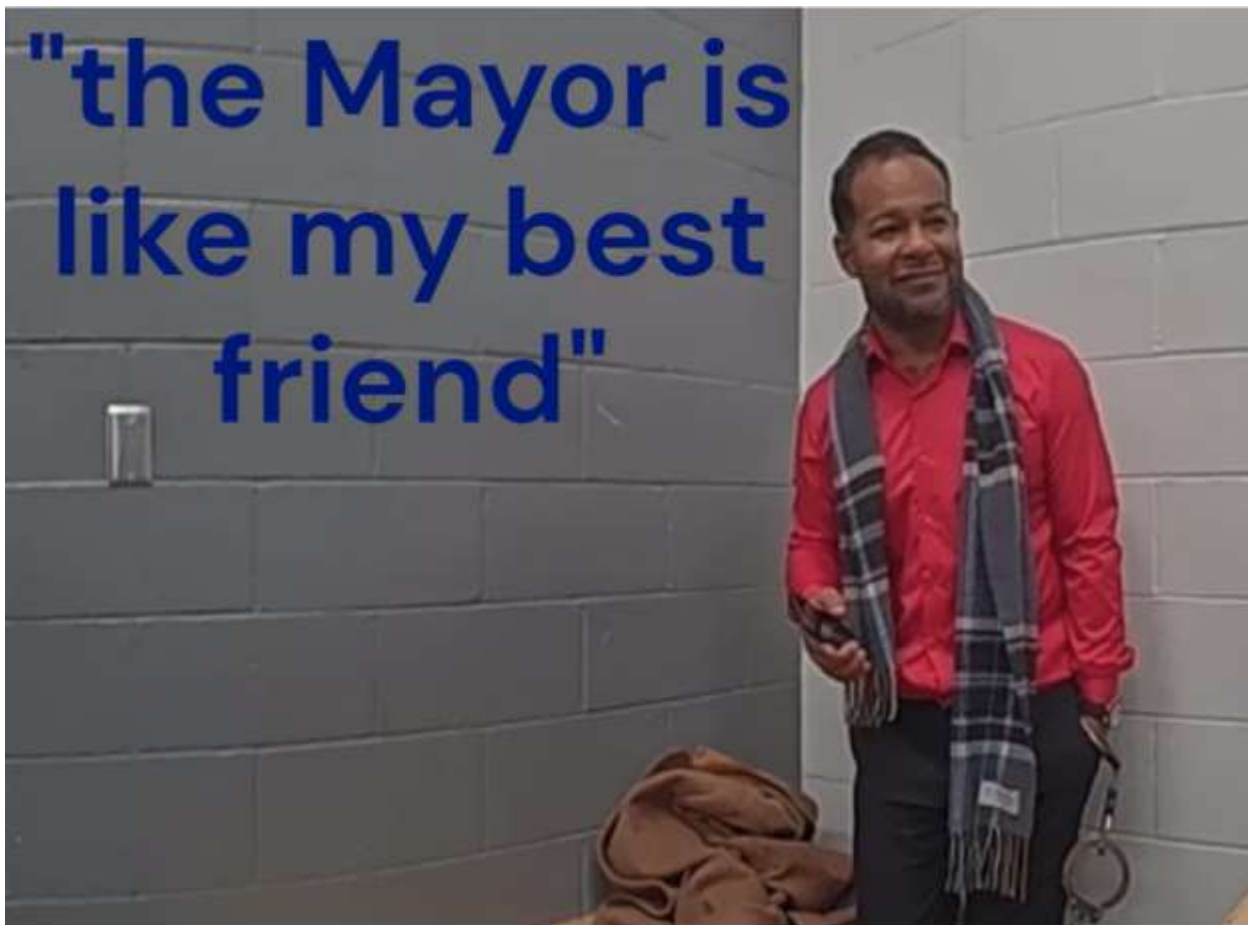
- Updated: Jan. 21, 2026 [Aprell May Munford](#) | AMunford@repub.com

For Reference:

City Charter Sec. 46. - Officer ceasing to be resident; conviction of crime.

Any office established under or by this act, except the office of superintendent of schools, shall become vacant if the incumbent ceases to be a resident of the city.

The conviction of the incumbent of any such office of a crime punishable by imprisonment shall operate to create a vacancy in the office held by him.



This still image was taken from an edited Massachusetts State Police video of the arrest of City Councilor Israel Rivera; it was released by two Holyoke police unions on Monday. The unions are calling for Rivera's resignation after he used racial slurs and threatened the city Police Department's budget during his arrest; the city department had no part in his arrest, as it was a state police traffic stop. In the video, Rivera tells the arresting officers that he called Holyoke Mayor Joshua A. Garcia, and that "the mayor is like my best friend." (Screenshot from video) Screenshot from Massachusetts State Police

HOLYOKE — Two local police unions want City Councilor Israel Rivera ousted after his racial slur-laden [arrest](#) last month, saying he invoked his position and sought special treatment to get out of a drunken-driving charge — but city leaders say that doesn't automatically trigger removal from office.

The Holyoke Police Supervisors Union Local 409 and the Police Patrolmen's Union Local 388 are urging the city to push Rivera to [step down](#) following allegations connected to the December arrest.

Rivera, 40, declined to comment.



[Watch above video, click HERE](#)

See Video Transcript at bottom of page

City Council President Tessa Murphy-Romboletti said the council must balance accountability with due process. She noted that Rivera's case is still ongoing, and that the council has limited authority to take disciplinary action.

But, Murphy-Romboletti did take action within her authority by removing Rivera from the public safety committee; during his arrest, Rivera told state police troopers that, "I'm the one that makes your (expletive) budget (racial slur). ... When it comes to me voting on your (expletive), I'm going to vote no, bro."

The City Council only has oversight of the Holyoke police budget, not the state police.

Nevertheless, Murphy-Romboletti said the decision to remove him from the public safety committee was deliberate and reflects her commitment to maintaining public trust, while also respecting due process.

She said, as council president, her responsibility is to keep the legislative body functioning and focused on city priorities.

“Until and unless there is a conviction or a clear legal directive that requires a council action, I intend to proceed in a manner consistent with how prior council presidents have handled similar circumstances and continue to move council business forward,” she said.

Rivera is scheduled to return to court Monday. He pleaded not guilty and previously said he plans to address the case while working to rebuild public trust.

If convicted of the misdemeanor OUI charge, he could face more than 100 days in jail. He also received civil citations for failing to stop or yield and for speeding, after he blew through a red light, which is what initiated his traffic stop by Massachusetts State Police troopers.

A conviction would not automatically remove Rivera from office. Under Massachusetts law, only a felony conviction results in forfeiture of public office. Removal of a local elected official would require a separate legal or charter-based process.

The unions’ call for Rivera’s resignation stems largely from the statements he made to police during the encounter, details of which are laid out in a video released this week by the unions.

According to a criminal complaint and body camera footage, state police stopped Rivera early Dec. 21 after a trooper observed his vehicle speeding and running a red light on Appleton Street in Holyoke.

Police said Rivera later drove onto a sidewalk near apartment buildings, because there was “nowhere else to go,” the complaint states.

Officers reported smelling alcohol, said Rivera’s speech was slurred, and that his eyes were glassy and said he admitted coming from Wyckoff Country Club, where he told police he had two drinks.

Rivera failed portions of the field sobriety tests, repeatedly referenced his position as a city councilor and asked for discretion, even offering to walk home.

Officers also reported that Rivera asked them to “work with” him, then added, “That’s fine. I’ll just cut the budget,” and said, “Everyone else (former [City Councilor David Bartley](#) and [Sheriff Nicholas Cocchi](#)) gets a pass, but I don’t.”

Police said Rivera became agitated, yelled, hit his head against a cruiser door, shouted profanities and used racial slurs.

He told officers, “You know who the (expletive) I am? I’m not a regular (racial slur),” and later, “I’m the one that makes your (expletive) budget (racial slur).”

Rivera added that he would cut the ShotSpotter alert system and also complained that state police were handling the stop instead of city police, saying Holyoke officers “don’t (expletive) work.”

Officers additionally reported that Rivera claimed a close relationship with Mayor Joshua A. Garcia and Police Chief Brian Keenan.

Some of Rivera’s statements during the arrest — particularly references to his position as a city councilor and to police budgets — are central to the unions’ argument that he violated the state’s conflict-of-interest law.

Massachusetts law bans city councilors and other elected officials from using their position to get special treatment, according to the State Ethics Commission.

The rule includes police encounters, such as traffic stops. The state’s conflict of interest law says officials may not mention or hint at their title to try to avoid a ticket or receive leniency.

The law applies even if no favor is granted. Its purpose is to prevent the appearance of unfairness and to ensure everyone is treated equally under the law.

Elected officials are not allowed to identify themselves as a councilor, suggest they work for the city, refer to political influence or relationships, or imply consequences for an officer’s decision during a traffic stop.

Even subtle actions, such as showing a badge or handing over an official business card, can violate the law.

Complaints about possible ethics violations usually start with an informal review by commission staff, based on public tips, news reports or other information.

The commission may close a case, issue a confidential educational letter for minor issues, or open a formal investigation if more serious concerns are found.

If a formal investigation is opened, the official is notified and allowed to respond. The commission may issue a confidential compliance letter or take public action, which can include a hearing or a civil fine. Most cases remain confidential unless made public by the commission.

The unions say Rivera’s actions warrant his resignation.

They filed a formal ethics complaint and requested body-camera footage after concerns raised with city officials went unanswered, noting Holyoke does not have its own municipal ethics commission.

Garcia could not be reached for comment Tuesday but has previously said that concerns raised by the police union about Rivera’s personal matters should be addressed by state officials or the unions’ attorneys. The unions call that a deflection.

“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,” Garcia said previously.

City officials and police leadership offered separate responses as the issue continued to draw attention.

Keenan said the department was aware of Rivera's comments before the video was released publicly and continues to support the statement by Garcia.

Holyoke city councilor proposes poet laureate position to boost arts and literacy Jan. 18, 2026, 9:03 a.m.

City Clerk Brenna Leary said Holyoke does not have a process in place for a recall petition. "Furthermore, we have not received any inquiries regarding this matter," Leary said.

Related:

Holyoke police unions release video of councilor's OUI arrest, call for resignation Jan. 20,

Video Transcript:

If I have had the mayor at the party with me when I got pulled over probably would have got no rose.

But we got these same here.

I don't understand like the mirror is like my best friend.

Like he just call me right now like that was him.

Yeah. He's like yo what the dude?

Y

it is what it is, bro.

You're only going to give me more credits, more reason to be elected.