

Holyoke mayor says councilor's comments during OUI arrest 'distract' from city's progress

- Updated: Jan. 21, 2026, [Aprell May Munford](#) Story source: MassLive.com
- HOLYOKE — Mayor Joshua A. Garcia says comments by City Councilor Israel Rivera [captured](#) on police body-worn cameras during Rivera's December [arrest](#) reflect poorly on the city at a time of progress.

Garcia said he does not support or defend Rivera's statements, calling the videos that have become public "a negative image for our city that distracts from all we strive to achieve."

His remarks come as Holyoke officials, police unions and residents weigh the political and legal fallout from Rivera's Dec. 22 arrest and the release of the footage.

In his response, Garcia praised the Holyoke Police Department, describing its work as "extraordinary and exemplary," particularly during [the first year](#) under the leadership of Police Chief Brian Keenan.

Rivera was arrested and charged with operating under the influence after Massachusetts State Police said he ran a red light and failed field sobriety tests.

Police body-camera footage shows Rivera repeatedly referencing his role as a city councilor and asking officers to use "discretion."

The video also depicts him offering to walk home, using racially charged language, criticizing both city and state police and threatening to cut police funding. At one point, Rivera questioned why Holyoke officers were seeking a pay raise.

Holyoke City Councilor Israel Rivera was charged with operating under the influence after state police say he sped through a construction zone early Dec. 22 and refused a breath test. (Aprell May Munford / The Republican)Aprell May Munford

The comments drew swift condemnation from two police unions — the Holyoke Police Supervisors Union Local 409 and the Police Patrolmen's Union Local 388 — which have called for Rivera to resign.

The unions said Rivera's remarks undermine the department and stand in conflict with Holyoke's stated commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion.

They filed an [ethics](#) complaint and requested the release of the state police body-camera footage, after saying their concerns raised with city officials went unanswered. Holyoke does not have its own ethics commission.

The unions also criticized Garcia, accusing him of initially deflecting criticism by focusing on police accomplishments, rather than addressing Rivera's conduct. They also said Holyoke officers are among the lowest-paid in the region and argued the footage shows Rivera is not an ally of the department.

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Despite the arrest, Rivera was elected [vice president](#) of the City Council earlier this year.

In response to Rivera's arrest, City Council President Tessa Murphy-Romboletti [removed](#) him from the council's Public Safety Committee, saying the council must balance accountability with due process and has limited authority while the criminal case is still open.

Rivera has declined to comment, citing the pending case. He has previously [said](#) he respects the law and hopes to rebuild public trust through his actions. He is scheduled to return to court Monday for a pretrial hearing.

A call to step down

As Rivera remains in office, attention has shifted from the arrest to what could happen next — including whether state law or the city's charter could allow for his removal from office.

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

According to Ward 5 City Councilor Linda Vacon, the Holyoke city charter states that a council seat would become vacant if a councilor is convicted while in office of a crime punishable by jail time or if the councilor no longer lives in the city.

Vacon said she supports Holyoke police, as well as state and federal law enforcement. She said Wednesday she believes he should leave the post.

“Israel Rivera … has shown himself unfit to serve by his words and actions,” she said.

RECOMMENDED

Holyoke police unions release video of councilor's OUI arrest, call for resignation Jan. 20, 2026, 12:22 p.m.

Embattled Holyoke councilor booted off public safety panel after OUI arrest Jan. 21, 2026, 10:43 a.m.

In the video footage, Rivera is heard threatening the police budget and seeking special treatment by police because he is a city councilor. He is also heard making racist comments that would not be tolerated by others, Vacon said.

“While we cannot force a person to resign, he should. This way, as a private citizen, he can deal with his personal problems in private,” she said.