

From: Paul Chapman - [REDACTED]
Sent: Thursday, November 6, 2025 6:52 PM
To: Elections, Ethics <ethicsandelections@seattle.gov>

Subject: Another Bruce Harrell Ethics Violation - Admin Work for Private Club

CAUTION: External Email

I am formally requesting an ethics investigation into Bruce Harrell's actions as reported by KUOW here: <https://www.kuow.org/stories/ethics-concerns-surface-from-bruce-harrell-s-time-as-seattle-city-council-president> [attached]

The important question is whether city staff performed work for a private organization at Bruce Harrell's behest as reported. Or if his relationship to the club created any other ethical violations. "Emails recently obtained by KUOW show that in addition to the phone call, Harrell directed his staff to perform administrative tasks for the club from 2016 to 2018, which could violate city ethics rules.... between 2016 and 2018, Harrell directed his city council staff to perform tasks for the Royal Esquire Club, which did not have secretarial support at the time and relied on leadership to pitch in. The emails show that the work included filling out insurance paperwork, collecting membership dues, drafting an event proposal, and contacting dozens of people, including city employees, to invite them to club events. On one occasion, Harrell invited Cedric the Entertainer to the club."

I am asking that this matter be fully and publicly investigated, especially as it appears Bruce Harrell has an [apparent pattern mixing public and private in his office](#) [attached].

Thank you
Paul Chapman

NEWS & STORIES / POLITICS

Ethics concerns surface from Bruce Harrell's time as Seattle City Council president



Ashley Hiruko

November 04, 2025 / 12:49 pm



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Updated 01.06 at 10:17am



Bruce Harrell addresses supporters during an election night gathering on Tuesday, November 2, 2021, at Block 41 on Bell Street in Seattle.

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The male colleague had been investigating allegations of wage theft at the Royal Esquire Club, a Black men's social club in Columbia City. Harrell, board chair of the club at the time, had called the investigator and made him uneasy.

It's been seven years since Harrell had that conversation with the investigator – but it set into motion a series of events that have called into question whether the current mayor has crossed an ethical line in his aim to protect the Royal Esquire Club when he was Seattle City Council president.

Emails recently obtained by KUOW show that in addition to the phone call, Harrell directed his staff to perform administrative tasks for the club from 2016 to 2018, which could violate city ethics rules.

Harrell said through a spokesperson that he did nothing unethical, as the club was in his district, and council members are supposed to help constituents.

“He has committed no ethical violations,” said spokesperson Jamie Housen, suggesting this story is a political hit piece right before the election.

“No one has complained about these constituent service activities from 10 years ago,” Housen said.

There have been no formal complaints lodged to the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission about the emails, which the commission would need to investigate Harrell's past conduct. But two former city council members and the city's current head of ethics say that in their view Harrell's work for the club may have crossed the line.

Wayne Barnett, the head of Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission, told KUOW that city council members may serve on boards while in office. What raises questions for him, however, was city staff doing side work at an elected official's behest.

Barnett said that could violate the city code of ethics, which says officials may not use city personnel “for a purpose which is, or to a reasonable person would appear to be, for other than a city purpose.”



“Having an elected leader who can steer resources to a private organization that they’re also running is always a problem,” Brunjes said. “We would prefer for any elected leader to step away from any fiduciary responsibility at any private sector organization while they serve.”

Nick Licata, who was a Seattle City Council member for 18 years, said helping constituents to that degree – as Harrell helped the Royal Esquire Club – is not typical.

“You have to ask yourself, how many groups can you afford to do that for?” Licata said. “If it’s just one group and other groups are not getting that service, then it would seem to me to be unfair.”

Former council member Teresa Mosqueda concurred. When asked if this was typical work, she answered plainly: “No.” “We have very specific full-time work at the City of Seattle,” she said.



Hi Team,

One thing that would really help me prioritize and plan ahead, would me for you all to give me **deadlines for the various projects that you would like for me to work on in the office**. I know that the Royal Esquire Club tasks take precedence but I still want to make sure that I am doing my daily tasks efficiently and in a timely manner.

This would really help me out!

Thank you!

Cierra Cooper
Legislative Assistant
Seattle City Council

An email from Cierra Cooper, a legislative assistant, to her team, asking for deadlines given that "the Royal Esquire Club tasks take precedence" in 2016.

KUOW

The 2018 phone call

The investigator told the head of his agency, Martin Garfinkel, director of the Office of Labor Standards, about Harrell calling him. He said that Harrell made what he considered to be a thinly veiled threat about the funding for their office.

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the president of the city council and be told what he was told, that he has an impact on the budget," Garimker said.

The labor standards office ultimately settled its claim against the Royal Esquire Club in June 2019. The office directed the club to pay one worker \$10,674, citing wage theft. Four others were paid \$100 to \$300 for unpaid sick time.

Meanwhile, the investigator's memo about Harrell's phone call languished for three years, until 2021, when Harrell ran for mayor.

A labor advocate named Rich Stolz – who supported Harrell's then-opponent, Lorena Gonzalez – heard about the call and filed a citizen complaint with the Ethics and Elections Commission.

[PubliCola reported on Stolz's complaint](#) , which the commission ultimately dropped.

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Cc: "Harrell, Bruce" <bruce.harrell@seattle.gov>
Date: Thu, 23 Mar 2017 10:12:42 -0700

Council President Harrell asked me to extend a special invitation for you to attend Esquire Icons Night Celebration on March 25 at 6:00 p.m. The Gentlemen of the Royal Esquire will be celebrating their Second Annual Icons Night where they will honor 3 exceptional community leaders and celebrate 69 years of Club service to the community.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best,

Legislative Assistant
Seattle City Council President Bruce Harrell

A staffer from councilmember Bruce Harrell's office invited someone to attend a function at the Royal Esquire Club in 2017.

KUOW

When the city staffer heard that the ethics commission wouldn't look into Harrell's phone call, she was surprised. She assumed the commission would take the complaint seriously – the city council president interfering with an investigation seemed wrong to her.



The staffer, who works for the city, requested anonymity in this story for fear of repercussions to her employment.

She sought the emails to find out why the ethics complaint was closed. But the emails revealed something else: That between 2016 and 2018, Harrell directed his city council staff to perform tasks for the Royal Esquire Club, which did not have secretarial support at the time and relied on leadership to pitch in.

The emails show that the work included filling out insurance paperwork, collecting membership dues, drafting an event proposal, and contacting dozens of people, including city employees, to invite them to club events. On one occasion, Harrell invited Cedric the Entertainer to the club.

City council members help constituents, and the Royal Esquire Club was in District 2, Harrell's district. But this, to the city staffer, seemed beyond the pale.

KUOW did not receive the emails from the city staffer – instead they came from an intermediary she knows who works for an organization that supports Katie Wilson, Harrell's opponent in the current mayoral race. That individual declined to comment about possible political motivations in this transfer.

However, the city staffer was willing to tell KUOW about her reasons for supporting the disclosure of the emails.

“I went to great lengths to get this information, but then once I got it, I didn't even know what to do with it or who to go to,” she told KUOW. “I do believe voters should know. I was a fly on the wall at City Hall long enough to see that accountability for elected officials only comes from the voters.”



Esquire Letter out Monday

From: Bruce Harrell <bruce210@msn.com>

Date: Sun, 05 Mar 2017 14:04:01 -0800

Team, will you all help Chase get out the following letter to the entire Esquire Club: Thank you.

An email from then-city council President Bruce Harrell to his city staff team, asking them to help with work related to the Royal Esquire Club, of which Harrell was board chair.

KUOW

The emails

The emails provided to KUOW span from 2016 to 2018 and show Harrell and his staff communicating about routine work for the Royal

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“I know that the Royal Esquire Club tasks take precedence,” Cooper wrote, “but I still want to make sure that I am doing my daily tasks efficiently and in a timely manner.”

Harrell’s office asserted to KUOW that the work for the club did not eclipse work for the city. “My duties were focused on critical administrative support, such as addressing constituent issues and managing other day-to-day tasks as instructed,” Cooper wrote in a statement provided by Harrell’s office.

“Any work related to the Royal Esquire Club was limited and did not come before my primary office responsibilities.”

Chase Munroe, another member of Harrell’s staff involved in assisting the club, wrote to KUOW: “I have always served the city ethically in every role I’ve been fortunate enough to be in,” he said.

“I have a great deal of confidence that Mayor Harrell and I were compliant with the Code of Ethics while he was a City Councilmember. Any implication or representation to the contrary would be extremely unfair and inaccurate.”

It’s unclear from the emails how much time these tasks took to complete. Harrell’s office contends it was minimal.

Harrell steps in

The Royal Esquire Club has a long and storied history in Seattle. At the time it was founded, in 1947, there were no other places for Black men to socialize. But as Seattle changed over the years and became more inclusive, membership waned, and the club faced mounting debt.

By the time Harrell volunteered to join club leadership in 2016, the nonprofit was struggling financially.

Ed Hill, president of the nonprofit at the time, said Harrell helped turn things around when he came on board.

“Bruce’s main strength was that he was good with organization,” Hill said. “He brought a new energy to the club.”



“Once again, there’s a Black man helping a predominantly Black organization and some people have issue with that,” he said.

Complaint dropped

In 2019, the Office of Labor Standards found that five female workers weren’t adequately paid for their work at the club, which operates primarily as a night club but [also provides scholarships and food for unhoused people](#) .

At least one of the women alleged wage theft.

The investigator’s written account of the phone call with Harrell didn’t become public until Harrell ran for mayor in 2021.

That’s when Stolz, who knew people in the labor standards office, heard about the Harrell call through the grapevine.

In a recent conversation with KUOW, Stolz said he filed the complaint with the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission because he felt the issue was important.

“I didn’t think it was right that an elected official would be able to attempt to intimidate the office of labor standards or staff from doing their job,” Stolz said.

The investigator Harrell called in 2018 never responded to requests for comment. Ultimately, Barnett, executive director of the commission, collected evidence but never drew a conclusion on the complaint’s merits.

Barnett said he explained this to Stolz, and that Stolz accepted his decision.

Because the complaint was closed, and not dismissed, it cannot be appealed.

Barnett said he did not bring charges against Mayor Harrell for making the phone call for several reasons. He said he had concerns about the strength of the case, which would rely in part on recollections and written accounts of one conversation between two parties three years

councilmember, and the investigation involved a Black-owned social club.

“Prosecuting the city's leading Black official for his work on behalf of a Black social club seemed problematic,” Barnett said in an email to KUOW.

“I am white, and at the time, every member of the Commission was as well. I decided against asking the Commission to fine Bruce Harrell for his work for the Royal Esquire Club.”

Barnett also considered that the complaint had made the news that summer, and voters still chose to elect Harrell in 2021. Barnett said it was the early days of the pandemic and he thought Harrell deserved a chance to govern.

As for the emails that KUOW received last month, Barnett said they could not be investigated, because so far, no complaints have been filed in relation to them.

Brunjes, the public policy professor at the UW, said Barnett’s line of thinking is potentially harmful to the effectiveness of ethical code.

“It's problematic to make ethical choices based on political context, because it will lead to an ethical system that is malleable, that can be used to justify just about anything, and won't lead to the preservation of what we might think of as core public value,” Brunjes said.

As for the woman who got the emails in the first place – she said she held onto the emails not to smear Harrell but “because having it felt like a back-pocket option to protect my team from reprisal or interference.”

Harrell was elected as Seattle mayor in 2021. He resigned from the Royal Esquire Club before taking office.

He remains connected to the club, however.

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November 4, 2025 (https://publicola.com/2025/11/04/harrell-travel/)

As Mayor, Harrell Paid for Luxury Upgrades on City Trips, Including a \$12,000 Flight and \$1,000-a-Night Hotels

[\(https://publicola.com/2025/11/04/harrell-travel/\)](https://publicola.com/2025/11/04/harrell-travel/)



Screenshot from Mayor Bruce Harrell's budget speech.

Now he wants voters to believe he represents the working class—and that his opponent, renter Katie Wilson, is an out-of touch-elite.

By Erica C. Barnett

Mayor Bruce Harrell has attacked his opponent Katie Wilson for being insufficiently “working-class,” casting himself as a man of the people running against an out-of-touch elitist who “has never had to struggle because her parents are still paying her bills at age 43,” as a campaign spokesperson put it last month.

Harrell, 67, has been wealthy for decades, and his travel while in office reflects his access to a personal expense account most ordinary travelers would envy. While traveling on city business, the mayor has spent tens of thousands of dollars of his own money to upgrade his accommodations from the economy flights and midrange hotel paid for by the city to purchase first-class flights and luxury accommodations for himself and his wife, Joanne.

Over a two-year period, according to documents obtained through a records request, Harrell spent at least \$55,000 on 16 first-class flights to attend conferences, tours, training sessions, and ceremonial events on behalf of the city, among at least 24 out-of-town trips he took during that period.

Hotels for 14 of those trips—the only ones for which the mayor’s office provided hotel expense information—cost at least another \$24,000.

Only a small portion of this sum, which represents part of the mayor’s travel between February 2023 and February 2025, was reimbursed by the city; the mayor paid for upgrades, and all of the first lady’s travel, on his own dime.

Generally, the Harrells paid for their travel by credit card (often accumulating Alaska airline points), and received partial reimbursement from the city, reflecting what the same trip would cost for the mayor alone if he was traveling on the city’s middlebrow dime. Harrell was often accompanied by mayoral staff and his security detail on his travels, but the records we received do not include travel costs for the mayor’s retinue.

The records reveal the extent to which Harrell has been out of town while on the job—at least 11 weeks in 2023, seven in 2024, and four weeks in the first six months of 2025. This almost certainly underrepresents the mayor’s travel, since it does not include vacation and may not include every city-sponsored trip; for instance, the documents show almost no travel between August and December 2024, indicating either that the mayor did not leave town for five straight months or that the mayor’s office did not provide complete records for that year.

We chose to look at February 2023 through February 2025 because that was the longest period for which the mayor’s office provided a relatively complete set of records.

The pricey flights and luxe hotels reflect the dramatic wealth gap between of Seattle's 57th mayor, who reported his family's net worth at around \$15 million in 2021, and most of his constituents, to whom lie-flat airplane beds and \$1,000-a-night hotels are far out of reach.

The records, which consist mostly of emails between mayoral staff and Joanne Harrell about travel details and reimbursements, don't include all hotel and flight expenses. For example, they exclude the cost of hotels and flights for at least seven trips, making a total tally of expenses impossible.

Still, the expense records we did receive show that the Harrells travel in style. Here are a few examples of the expenses the Harrells incurred while traveling on the city's behalf. In most cases, the city paid only for the estimated cost of an economy class flight and the price for a mid-range hotel, typically between \$250 and \$300 a night, with the Harrells paying the difference. In some cases, such as the Bloomberg trip, conference organizers were the ones paying the cost of economy fares.

- **\$2,600** for one first-class ticket for Harrell to attend the Bloomberg City Data Alliance in Baltimore in May 2023;
- **\$7,800** for two first-class tickets for the Harrells to attend the Seattle Chamber's annual International Leadership Mission in Bergen, Norway, where—according to the program—attendees discussed “Regional Promotion on the Global Stage Through Tourism,” learned about advancements maritime and airline industry sustainability, and participated in “Sister City Engagements” in Bergen and Reykjavik, Iceland.
- **\$13,000** for two first-class tickets to Tokyo and Seoul, South Korea in June 2023, for a nine-day trip billed as “G7 trip” in emails between Harrell's staff and Joanne Harrell. Incomplete travel records for this trip suggest the Harrells' hotels cost \$1,000 for one night in Tokyo and \$2,200 for three nights in Seoul.
- **\$5,500** for two first-class flights and \$2,600 for three nights in a hotel in Washington, D.C. in 2024 for a trip that included a state dinner at the White House.

- **\$3,500** for two first-class tickets to Columbus, Ohio for a two-night trip to attend the US Conference of Mayors’ annual event. According to the mayoral staffer who calculated the city’s reimbursement, an economy-class ticket for the same trip was about \$550.

The mayor is obviously free to spend his wealth however he chooses. But Harrell has repeatedly claimed the “working class” mantle in order to attack his opponent, who shares a one-bedroom apartment with her husband and young child, as comparatively privileged and out of touch. It’s unclear whether voters who struggle to pay their own bills will buy into Harrell’s claim that he’s just like them.

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