

AI Summary: Fort White Recall of Lonnie Harrell on the Court Docket This Afternoon at 4 PM - Former Town Attorney Judge Fred Koberlein, Jr., Presiding

Fort White, FL heads to an emergency virtual court hearing at 4 pm today over the April 14 recall election of Councilman Lonnie Harrell, amid a year-long governance meltdown.

After the January 2025 departures of the town clerk, her assistant, and the town attorney, meetings under newly elected Mayor George Jacob Thomas devolved into chaos, prompting the council to install Vice Mayor Kathryn Terry as presiding officer; the town attorney then resigned.

A recall drive against Harrell emerged in January 2026. Initially chaired by Diana Frazier Cook—who has family ties to former top officials — she resigned on February 9 and publicly retracted her claims about Harrell's incompetence. The next day, February 10, the mayor's brother, Giorgio Thomas, was chairing the recall committee. Records requests tied to these changes were ignored.

Though Florida law requires the clerk to issue blank petition forms for 30% of district voters, the mayor assembled petitions including a full voter list; Harrell's defensive statement was "for the most part, unreadable." Despite this, both petition rounds were certified and a recall election set.

Councilman Harrell filed for an emergency injunction on March 30. The case went to Judge Fred Koberlein Jr., Fort White's former attorney for nearly nine years. Citing judicial ethics rules and precedent, the article points out recusal is "strongly warranted," also noting Judge Koberlein could claim the matter is unrelated. The hearing will be on Zoom, drawing criticism for limiting in-person public observation.

Two Quotes:

"I hereby resign from my position as the Chairperson for the Committee of the Recall of Lonnie Harrell, effective immediately. I also formally retract my previous remarks stating that he is incompetent and neglectful of his duties."

— Diana Frazier Cook, original Recall Committee Chair

"Recusal is warranted when a judge's prior role as counsel creates an obligation that could cloud impartiality in a related matter."

— Florida Judicial Ethics Advisory Committee