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BREAKING

Petition to recall Deadwood commissioner deemed valid

By Sara Morgan Black Hills Pioneer
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DEADWOOD — Deadwood Finance Officer Jessica McKeown, Tuesday, verified signatures on a petition to recall Deadwood City Commissioner Blake Joseph.

“This recall is about accountability and trust,” said Chloe Ager, petition organizer. “The people of Deadwood deserve leaders who uphold the law, respect their office, and reflect the values of the community. Many Deadwood residents believe that Commissioner Joseph has failed in each of these duties. This vote will give citizens the chance to decide whether Commissioner Joseph should serve out his term or be removed early.”

A recall election could end Joseph’s term early. Uncontested, he could remain in office until June 2027.

The advertisement features a man in a dark jacket sitting at a desk, looking at a laptop. The background is a blurred office setting. To the right of the image, on a red background, is the text 'Boost your productivity.' in white. Below this is a blue button with the text 'Start free trial'. To the right of the button is the Adobe Acrobat logo, which includes the word 'Adobe' in red and 'Acrobat' in black.

Under South Dakota Codified Law (SDCL) 9-13-30, a petition signed by 15 percent of the registered voters of any municipality demanding the election of a successor to a commissioner must be filed with the finance officer, who must present it to the governing body at its next meeting. More information is expected to be presented at the Oct. 6 City Commission meeting.

The law states allowable grounds for removal are, "misconduct, malfeasance, nonfeasance, crimes in office, drunkenness, gross incompetency, corruption, theft, oppression, or gross partiality."

Reasons cited for the recall include misconduct, crimes committed while in office, oppression and abuse of office, and gross partiality.

According to the petition, under a complaint of misconduct, petitioners claim Joseph engaged in "repeated and disturbing of behavior." Petitioners claim community members have made documented complaints about receiving harassing texts, emails, and messages from Joseph, "creating a climate of fear and intimidation."

Also under misconduct, petitioners claim Joseph has received a ban from volunteering at the Lead-Deadwood School District, citing complaints from students who, "reported feeling uncomfortable."

The claim follows a letter from Lead-Deadwood Elementary School Principal Dan VanBibber, informing parents of complaints from students during the May 8-9 spelling bee of a judge who "made them feel uncomfortable and uneasy."

Joseph was one of three judges of the inaugural event. The letter did not indicate which judge, nor their gender, was the subject of the letter.

"Let me assure you that at no point in time were our students ever in any danger or left alone with this individual," wrote VanBibber. "Our Resource Officer or I were always in the auditorium, along with classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, and other parents and students. After these students came forward with this information, we began our process of a full investigation to ensure this matter was handled quickly and completely."

VanBibber assured parents that the judge was no longer able to volunteer at the school.

Joseph made a Facebook post May 21.

"A confidential school matter was irresponsibly leaked and spread online, twisted into something ugly and false. I've said nothing publicly — until now," wrote Joseph. "Let me be clear: I did nothing wrong."

"I have volunteered my time, mentored students, and served this community with integrity. I'm a father to a six-year-old daughter, and the suggestion that I acted inappropriately isn't just false — it's offensive. I helped. I showed up. And now, I'm being targeted for it."

On Sept. 19, Joseph made another public post on Facebook, this time announcing that he was taking legal action against the Lead-Deadwood School District and other individuals in a defamation case. Joseph claimed \$30 million in restitution was owed to him after Superintendent Erik Person and VanBibber knowingly disseminated “false, malicious, and reputationally destructive allegations without evidence.”

All Facebook posts have been signed using his official title as Deadwood city commissioner.

Person, superintendent for the district, told the Pioneer that he was unaware of any lawsuits being filed. As of Tuesday, the Pioneer was unable to find state or federal court documents indicating that a lawsuit had been filed.

On Sept. 22, Deadwood Mayor Charlie Struble-Mook issued a statement on behalf of the city, clarifying that Joseph, “has acted independently and solely on his own behalf.”

“His conduct and statements related to the school have not been authorized or supported by the City of Deadwood, nor do they carry the weight of the city’s policies or intentions,” wrote Struble-Mook. “Commissioner Joseph’s actions should be understood as personal and not as those of the city or its governing body.”

Struble-Mook asked that all city commissioners refrain from using their official title in any measures outside of official city business.

On the petition, under the misconduct allegation, petitioners cited a formal complaint filed with the city, accusing Joseph of sexually harassing underage girls during his employment at Terry Peak Ski Resort.

A copy of the complaint was obtained by the Pioneer with names redacted for the safety of the minor children involved. The complaint alleges that a 17-year-old employee at Terry Peak made their parents aware that they had complained to management at the ski resort about several incidents in which Joseph made the child and their friends feel uncomfortable with inappropriate comments and behavior.

Under a complaint of oppression and abuse of office, petitioners alleged that Joseph abused his position by threatening constituents in emails using his official title. Threats reportedly suggest that Joseph would send law enforcement to their homes as a result of criticism against Joseph’s actions while in office.

Petitioners cited crimes Joseph has committed in office, including a careless driving charge following a July 2024 incident before the Days of '76 parade when he allegedly struck a firefighter who was manning a roadblock with his vehicle. The charge of traveling through the roadblock from that incident was dismissed in May 2025. However, on July 2, Joseph failed to appear for his trial for the careless driving charge. A bench warrant was issued.

Joseph’s careless driving charge is a Class 2 misdemeanor. The failure to appear charge is a Class 1 misdemeanor, punishable by up to a year in jail and a \$2,000 fine.

Joseph pleaded no contest to the two charges at the Monday trial. He was sentenced to pay \$500 in fines for court costs, about \$200 for the careless driving charge, almost \$300 for the charge of failure to appear, and issued a suspended 30-day jail sentence.

On Aug. 7, Joseph was cited for having an open container of alcohol in a motor vehicle.

According to court reports, Joseph was allegedly driving 58 miles per hour in a 45 mile per hour zone. He was issued a warning for speeding and was cited with a Class 2 misdemeanor for possessing the open container. The charge came with a \$132.50 fine, which he paid.

A Class 2 misdemeanor is punishable by up to 30 days in jail and a \$500 fine.

Sept. 20, Joseph was issued a \$232.50 fine for a speeding ticket.

On Monday, a complaint was filed, and a warrant was issued after Joseph was charged with allegedly sending threatening or harassing messages stemming from a June incident.

A phone call and email to Joseph seeking comment were not returned by press time.

According to SDCL 9-13-32, any mayor, commissioner, or trustee sought to be removed from office by recall may be placed on the ballot unless the incumbent expresses a wish to not be placed on the ballot in writing to the auditor. If no other candidate is nominated for the position, the incumbent shall remain in office.

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