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EDITOR'S PICK

JOE'S POLITICAL FIX

Holleman: Maplewood remains tight-lipped on search for new city manager

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By Joe Holleman

Political correspondent/columnist

Transparency in government is a murky issue. Just ask Maplewood.

Actually, if you should decide to ask Maplewood — specifically about its process for hiring a new city manager — be prepared to make numerous phone calls, send a brace of emails and texts and even tuck a business card into a holiday wreath on a front door.

But even that hasn't worked in getting an elected official in Maplewood to answer any questions.

And it's not like just one or two officials are dodging queries about their process for picking a new person to run the day-to-day operations of the southwest St. Louis suburb.

The mayor and all six city council members have been unwilling over the last three weeks to discuss the issue.

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The mayor of Maplewood is **Nikylan Knapper**, who was elected in April 2021 (and has the nice wreath).

She has not responded to multiple requests for comment left on her City Hall line, on her cellphone, or on her work line at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, where she works as an administrative judge.

Also declining to return calls have been the six council members: Matt Coriell, Krista Garcia, Chasity Mattox, Eric Page, Nick Homa and Shawn Faulkingham, who also is the deputy mayor.

But from what can be gleaned so far, the story about Maplewood's search for a new city manager goes something like this:

About two months after Knapper took office in April 2021, Maplewood hired a new city manager to replace the retiring Martin J. Corcoran, who had served in that post for about 30 years.

The new hire was Michael Reese, who was selected after a multi-candidate, 20-month search. Reese, a former mayoral chief of staff in Columbus, Ohio, joined Maplewood's payroll in summer 2021.

Then just two months ago, in late September, Reese quietly quit his post with no parting comments, **local news services** reported, and police chief Matt Nighbor was appointed as interim city manager.

About the same time that Reese left, the Maplewood City Council voted to increase the pay range for the city's manager position, up to a maximum of \$175,000.

For his part, Nighbor said hiring a new city manager is the responsibility of the mayor and the council members, and then he referred all questions to them.

But unlike Reese's hiring — and unlike many municipalities, which tend to make public productions out of searching for a new city manager — Knapper and company appear to be playing things close to the vest: There is no evidence of an exhaustive search, or of a large field of candidates.

But at least Knapper knows people, like **Amber Withycombe**.

Withycombe, director of donor communications at Washington University, was elected to the Maplewood-Richmond Heights school board in April 2021. She also is nearing the end of a three-year term on the Maplewood Plan and Zoning Commission.

Withycombe's partner is Joshua Kryah, an SIU-Edwardsville English professor and poet. He has been serving as Knapper's campaign treasurer since September 2022.



Nikylan Knapper, mayor of Maplewood.
City of Maplewood



Amber Withycombe, of the Maplewood-Richmond Heights school board.
Maplewood-Richmond Heights Board of Education

Both Kryah and Withycombe donated money to Knapper's mayoral campaign, according to reports filed with the Missouri Ethics Commission.

Kryah could not be reached for comment. Withycombe did have a comment, telling a reporter, "I have nothing to say to you."

But Withycombe is enough of a viable candidate for the city manager's job to take part in an interview that included a small group of business owners and residents.

But the invitation to the interview came with a catch:

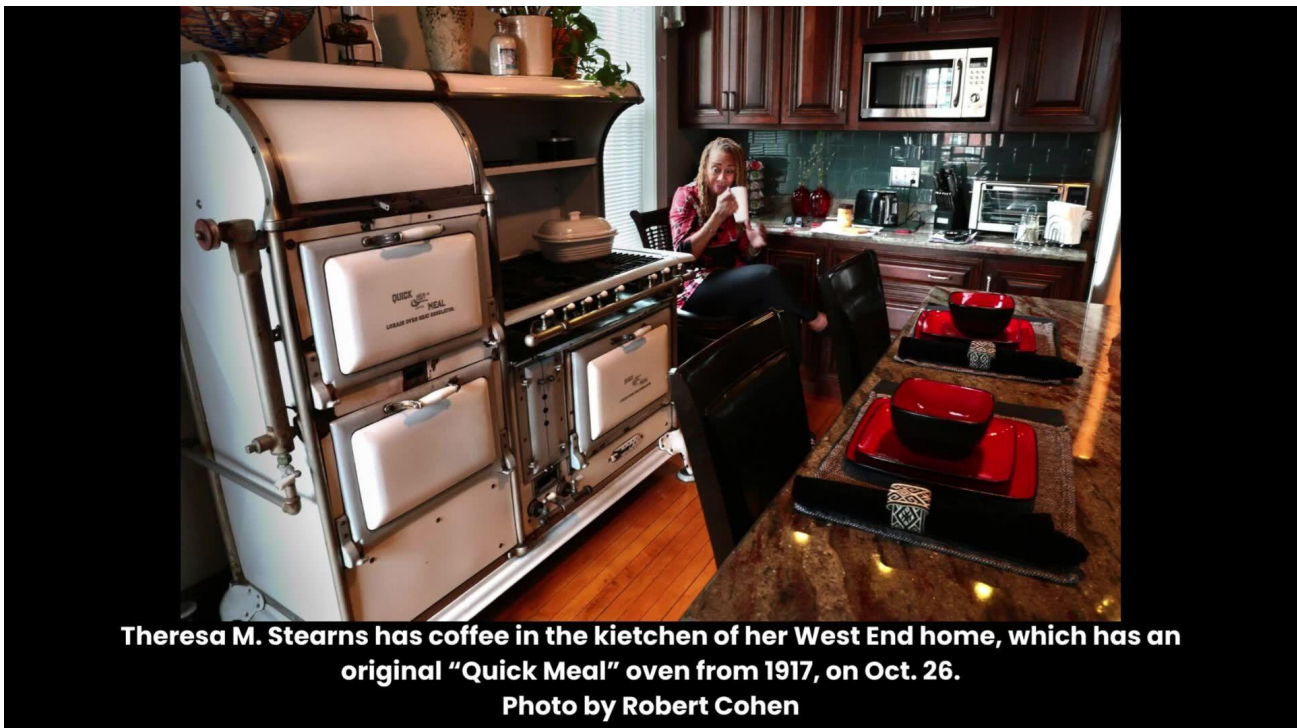
The people who were picked to meet with Withycombe were required to sign a nondisclosure agreement — promising not to share with anyone outside of the chosen few what was actually said at the meeting.

There was no public discussion about hiring a new city manager at the most recent Maplewood City Council meeting, held on Nov. 14.

After the public portion of that meeting, the mayor and council went into executive session to discuss personnel matters and legal issues, as allowed by Missouri law.

Whether any action was taken in the executive session is not known, as Maplewood city clerk Andrea Majoros did not respond to messages.

The next meeting of the Maplewood City Council is scheduled for 7 p.m. Dec. 12, at 7601 Manchester Road.



Photographs from St. Louis Post-Dispatch staff for the week beginning Oct. 29, 2023. Video by Beth O'Malley
 Beth O'Malley