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ALERT

JOE'S POLITICAL FIX

## Holleman: Maplewood paid \$130K to former city manager shortly after resignation

Dec 6, 2023

By Joe Holleman

Political correspondent/columnist

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**F**or the second time in her short tenure as Maplewood mayor, Nikylan Knapper stands ready to hire a city manager.

The first time apparently ended with the city paying more than \$130,000 for Michael Reese to go away quietly.

Records obtained by the Post-Dispatch show that on Oct. 3 — shortly after Reese abruptly quit in September after just two years on the job — the city paid Reese \$131,191.

The records show the payment was in addition to the \$164,854 Reese was paid in regular salary in 2023.

The city has yet to respond to a request for specifics about the payment, and the payment record does not offer an explanation: It lists only the pay date in the description field.

And now for her second attempt at hiring a city manager, Knapper's preferred candidate seems to be Amber Withycombe.

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Withycombe is a friend of Knapper, who already has appointed Withycombe to the Plan and Zoning Commission.

Nikylan Knapper, mayor of Maplewood.  
City of Maplewood

Withycombe's partner, Joshua Kryah, serves as Knapper's campaign treasurer.

Withycombe is director of donor communications at Washington University and a member of the Maplewood-Richmond Heights school board.

According to her LinkedIn listing, covering employment since 1995, Withycombe has never worked in city management nor has ever been employed by a municipality. She recently earned a master's degree in public administration, the listing notes.

Knapper, who chose not to respond to previous interview requests, finally returned a call Monday. But she had little to say about the city manager situation.

"I can't comment on that," Knapper said of the \$131,000 payment to Reese.

Knapper said she would address the matter at a City Council work session to be held before the regular council meeting on Dec. 12.

When asked if she saw a conflict with Withycombe being a city manager candidate, Knapper said, “I do not see a problem with that.”

Knapper opted not to comment further, about whether she or another council member recommended Withycombe. She said that issue also would be addressed on Dec. 12.

Some politically active Maplewood residents, however, have had comments, airing grievances last week on a Facebook page, “**Maplewood, MO.**”

Jon-Erik Hansen, Knapper’s campaign treasurer until he was replaced by Kryah, expressed dissatisfaction with the city’s unwillingness to discuss Reese’s departure.

“Was it the best use of our tax dollars to buy out our previous city manager?” said Hansen, who concluded by asking “how much did we pay to clean up after people’s dysfunctional relationships?”

Maplewood resident Ian Storm, a former council candidate, also posted his concerns last week about the current city manager situation.

“It doesn’t sit well to have the appearance of cronyism within our local government,” Storm said. “The City Manager is arguably more important than the mayor ... and hiring someone under an umbrella of secrecy is not the way to conduct good government.”



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

Maplewood-Richmond Heights Board of Education

After the issue with Withycombe surfaced last week, all six City Council members declined to respond to emails and phone messages.

Since then, only Councilwoman Chastity Mattox has broken the council's silence.

A lifelong Maplewood resident, Mattox refused to talk about specific candidates but said the process has been frustrating.

“There is no process in writing, we have no handbook for it and we have no human resources person,” said Mattox, who defeated Storm in a write-in race in April. “It all seems very unusual.”

The current hiring process is a far cry from the exhaustive search city officials began in 2019, when city manager Martin Corcoran stepped down after more than 30 years with the city.

Barry Greenberg, a former council member who was elected mayor in 2017, was part of the recruiting process to find Corcoran's replacement.

Greenberg said the city hired a personnel firm to help conduct the search after two attempts — using job postings in government-related publications and municipal league websites — failed to produce a candidate acceptable to all council members.

“It's important to have a unanimous vote for a city manager,” Greenberg said.



Former Maplewood city manager Michael Reese  
(Photo by City of Maplewood)

Joe Holleman

The first candidate found by the firm, and the third overall, entered into extended negotiations with the city. That candidate ultimately took an offer from another St. Louis County municipality.

After Greenberg lost the mayor's race to Knapper in April 2021, another search brought forth Reese as a possible candidate, said Sandi Phillips, a council member from 2018 until April of this year.

Phillips said Reese's name did not come up until that last search, "when we widened the field."

Some residents contend that elevating Withycombe to the short list of city manager candidates marks another move by Knapper to place her friends in key government positions.

Shortly after taking office in April 2021, Knapper recommended the hiring of Brandi R. Miller as municipal judge.

Miller left that post two months ago to become a family court judge in St. Louis County. In the 27 months she served as municipal judge, Maplewood paid Miller \$41,280.

Miller and Knapper were colleagues on the Maplewood-Richmond Heights school board before Knapper was elected mayor.

Then in March, while Miller still was municipal judge, Knapper used her as her attorney in a divorce case.

"I do not see where the conflict is in that," Knapper said Monday.

On Monday, Miller said her friendship with Knapper did not create a conflict with serving as municipal judge. She also said she could not comment about acting as Knapper's divorce attorney.

Some residents have complained that Miller's appointment ignored recommendations made in the Ferguson Report, which said cities should avoid appointing judges who worked as prosecutors or judges in other municipalities.

Miller has worked for "a number of St. Louis County municipalities," according to the **family court website**.

Former council member Phillips said she supported Knapper when she was first elected, but that support evaporated.

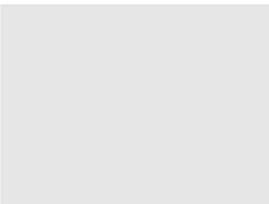
Specifically, Phillips questioned Knapper's method of appointing residents to city boards and commissions.

"She just blatantly appointed her friends to these positions," Phillips said. "I wanted to be a team player, but it just became a toxic environment."

When asked what created such an atmosphere, Phillips said, "The mayor, 100%."

*Originally posted Tuesday, Dec. 5.*

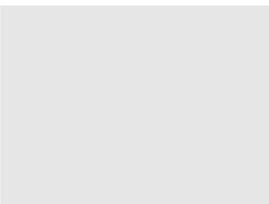
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### **Holleman: Maplewood remains tight-lipped on search for new city manager**

Joe Holleman

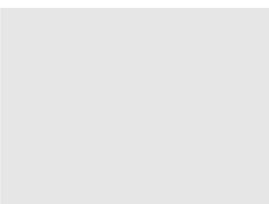
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Joe Holleman

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