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ALERT

JOE'S POLITICAL FIX

Holleman: Friend of Maplewood mayor advances toward city manager's job

Dec 9, 2023

By Joe Holleman

Political correspondent/columnist

The leading candidate for the Maplewood city manager job — who is a friend and political ally of Mayor Nikylan Knapper — is the only prospect so far who has been taken around to meet with community leaders.

That candidate, Amber Withycombe, has contributed to Knapper's campaigns; her partner, Joshua Kryah, is the mayor's campaign treasurer.

Knapper has had few comments about the situation, saying "I don't see a problem" with Withycombe being the leading candidate. Withycombe has declined to comment.

The situation, however, has drawn sharp criticism from some former council members — all of whom supported Knapper during her 2021 campaign.

The information about the progress comes from Councilman Matt Coriell, who recently posted a timeline on a Facebook page that outlines in general terms the selection process being used. He identified the frontrunner simply as "a candidate." Sources say that candidate is Withycombe.



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

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Coriell said the council voted 5-1, with Knapper abstaining, to select a preferred candidate. His post did not include information about how each council member voted, and the city has not responded to a Sunshine Law request asking for the roll call results.

The timeline also said the candidate has been interviewed twice by the council; has met with businesspeople, community members, and key city employees; and has had a discussion with the superintendent of the Maplewood-Richmond Heights School District. The candidate also has made a presentation to the various groups.

The selection process now is being called into question by several former members of the city council.

“There is an absolute lack of transparency,” said Jenny Schmidt, an attorney and member from 2017 to 2022. “Whether it’s intentional or accidental, it’s still problematic.”

Sarah Crosley, on the council from 2020 until April, said she is disappointed that current members are going along with such a murky selection process.

“Everyone on the council needs to decide when they’re tired of saying ‘yes’ to (Knapper),” Crosley said. “They have some soul-searching to do.”

Crosley works as a public health director and previously served as executive assistant to St. Louis County Councilwoman Lisa Clancy, D-5th District, who is a Maplewood resident.

Withycombe is president of the district’s school board and works as the director of donor communications at Washington University.

Her LinkedIn listing shows that she has never worked in city management and has never been employed by a municipality. She currently is working toward a master’s degree in public administration, the listing notes.

Withycombe’s lack of city-management experience is one issue that has raised specific concerns about the city process that has made her a front-runner.

Schmidt said when she took part in four separate city-manager searches between 2019 and 2021, some candidates were eliminated because they didn’t have enough experience.

Crosley believes that along with Withycombe’s lack of work experience, the manner in which she has risen to the top of the search heap “is not a great look.”

Crosley said, some complaints could have been avoided if Withycombe’s name had surfaced through a “rigorous” search process.



Nikylan Knapper, mayor of Maplewood.
City of Maplewood

"It wouldn't be the problem that it is now," Crosley said, adding that the city has opened itself to "very valid and fair criticism. It's a liability."

And Crosley said if Withycombe gets the job, whether her qualifications are sufficient enough, many will chalk up her getting hired to her connections to the mayor.

"I'm not sure I'd put a friend through that," Crosley said.

Crosley and Schmidt, who readily identified themselves as progressive candidates, and former Councilwoman Sandi Phillips all said that once Knapper was elected, she wasted no time in appointing friends and political allies to city boards and commissions.

The situation surrounding appointment methods was significant because it had been a contentious issue in years prior to the 2021 election.

All three said the mayor traditionally held the reins when it came to city appointments, and younger residents felt squeezed out of taking part in local government.

Former Mayor Barry Greenberg, after facing growing opposition from new progressive council members, opened up the process to allow more council input, they said.

And during her campaign, all three said Knapper expressed support for continuing that policy.

"And then the first time we had an appointment, she completely disregarded" the more collaborative method, Schmidt said.

Said Crosley, "I was completely taken aback by how it all shook out."

Phillips described Knapper's favoring of friends for appointments as "blatant," and said it helped created a "toxic environment" on the council.

Another community leader, Jon-Erik Hansen, said he also was blindsided by Knapper's change in philosophy.

Hansen has run several campaigns for progressive candidates over the last few years. He also was Knapper's original campaign treasurer until Kryah, Withycombe's partner, took over in 2022.

"I did not resign; I was unceremoniously replaced," Hansen said. He said he learned he'd been replaced when he tried unsuccessfully to log into the Knapper campaign account with the Missouri Ethics Commission.

"No call, text, anything to notify me," he said.

Hansen said he had concerns about Knapper's appointment process, especially her efforts to name Brandi Miller, a colleague on the MRH school board and political supporter, as the city's municipal judge.

Miller and Knapper were colleagues on the MRH school board before Knapper was elected mayor. Knapper also used Miller recently for her divorce case.

"My last contact with her was shortly after the election when these concerns were raised by my wife and I in a meeting with Knapper," Hansen said.

Said Hansen, "I think that showed her that we would not be blindly loyal, and we were thus no longer needed."

Miller was hired as municipal judge in June 2021 and left two months ago to become a St. Louis County family court commissioner. In slightly more than two years, Maplewood paid Miller \$41,280 for the part-time job.

The need for a new city manager stems back to late September, when Michael Reese abruptly anklked the position.

On Oct. 3, the city paid Reese \$131,000 as part of a separation agreement.

Shortly after Reese left, the city increased the maximum pay for the job to \$170,000. About two weeks later, the council took its vote to advance Withycombe as the preferred candidate.

Knapper and Coriell both have said the city manager issues will be discussed at the council meeting on Dec. 12.



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Santa joins Jamie Brewster, 6, of St. Charles, in making a silly face while posing for photos on Wednesday, Nov. 15, 2023, at Mid Rivers Mall in St. Peters. Brewster presented Santa with a card he drew with candy taped inside. Santa will be at Mid Rivers through Christmas Eve. Photo by Christian Gooden.

Post-Dispatch photographers selected some of their best photos from November 2023. [View the full gallery here.](#)