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Holleman: Amid public complaints, Maplewood hires mayor's friend as city manager

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By Joe Holleman

Political correspondent/columnist

Amid pointed criticism and calls to delay action, the Maplewood City Council voted 5-1 Tuesday to hire a friend of Mayor Nikylan Knapper as the new city manager.

Amber Withycombe, who has no prior work experience in city management, said she is set to start Jan. 4.

The position was filled without using a personnel search company or even posting the job opening in professional and community publication and websites.

Withycombe, director of donor communications at Washington University, has been a contributor to the campaigns of Knapper.

Withycombe's partner, Joshua Kryah, had been Knapper's campaign manager; the position now is held by Shevaun McNaughton.

After Tuesday's meeting, Knapper said the change in the campaign organization was made a week ago, about a week after media reports began focusing on questions surrounding the city manager situation.

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Amber Withycombe, center, smiles as people applaud after the Maplewood City Council voted to appoint Withycombe as city manager on Tuesday, Dec. 12, 2023. Left of Withycombe is Joshua Kyah.

David Carson, Post-Dispatch

Withycombe's salary has not been determined; Councilman Shawn Faulkingham, who is deputy mayor, said the city still is negotiating the salary.

The need for a new city manager stems back to late September, when Michael Reese abruptly quit his job without comment. Several sources say Reese's departure stemmed from conflicts with Knapper.

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



Maplewood Mayor Nikylan Knapper addresses the crowd during a meeting of the Maplewood City Council at the Maplewood City Hall on Tuesday, Dec. 12, 2023. During the meeting the city council appointed Amber Withycombe city manager. Knapper abstained from the vote to appoint Withycombe.

David Carson, Post-Dispatch

About 75 people attended the council meeting, with 11 of the 13 speakers expressing concerns about hiring Withycombe.

"Part of being a good public servant is being willing to say you made a mistake," Chad Garrison said. "And I think that mistakes were made on multiple levels."

"You're trying to save \$10,000" by not hiring a search firm, Garrison said. "But then you spend \$130,000 to send the former city manager packing."

Garrison described himself as a personal friend of Kyah and Withycombe, whom he described as "smart" and "quite capable."

"But I don't understand what's the rush; let's slow this down," Garrison said, adding that having to read the Post-Dispatch to find out specific information about the city manager search "is quite alarming."

Ray Crader, a former Maplewood council member, agreed and asked the council to “slow down.” He said city residents have “some very valid concerns” about how the hiring process has gone.

Other speakers slammed the decision to hire someone with no city management experience.

Opening her remarks with a barb about Withycombe's work toward a master's degree in public administration, Jennifer Phillips said, “I also have an MPA, so I realize I'm qualified to run a city.”

Phillips went on to say it is “a real disservice” to hire a new city manager without posting the opening.

“It also makes me wonder where else did the city cut corners, where else did we take the easy road,” Phillips said, adding that the current process seems as if the council “just threw friends' names into a hat,” she said.

Withycombe's LinkedIn listing, going back to 1995, shows that she has never worked in city management and never has been employed by a municipality. She is working toward a master's degree in public administration, the listing notes.

Knapper abstained from voting on Withycombe's appointment; Councilwoman Chasity Maddox cast the only vote against hiring her.

Maddox has been uncomfortable with the process adopted to come up with Withycombe. “It all seems very unusual,” she said.

After the meeting, Withycombe discounted her lack of city management experience as not being “anything that needs to be overcome.”

She then pointed to her past employment with several tax-supported institutions. Also, she is president of the Maplewood-Richmond Heights school board and sits on the city's Plan and Zoning Commission.

Knapper said she was confident that Withycombe would be “an excellent person for our city.”

Former Mayor Barry Greenberg, who Knapper defeated in April 2021, said Withycombe's lack of experience should be taken into account.

Greenberg then compared the Maplewood job with those in two adjacent, similar municipalities: Brentwood and Richmond Heights.

According to the Post-Dispatch “Public Pay” database covering 2022, Maplewood paid Reese \$169,872 to manage 81 full-time employees. The city has a population of about 8,200 and an annual general-fund budget of about \$9.9 million.

Brentwood city administrator Bola Okande was paid \$169,860 in 2022 to manage 109 employees and an annual general-fund budget of about \$14.9 million.

Okande has been in that job for 12 years, after serving six years as assistant administrator.

Richmond Heights city manager Amy Hamilton was paid \$157,827 in 2022 to manage 113 employees and an annual general-fund budget of about \$11.5 million. She has been in that job for 19 years and was assistant manager for more than four years.

“And we’ve got someone (Withycombe) who doesn’t have any experience at all,” he said. “If she gets anywhere near the same salary, we shouldn’t stand for that.”

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