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JOE'S POLITICAL FIX

Holleman: Maplewood ethics panel urges dismissal of complaint against council member

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By Joe Holleman

Political correspondent/columnist

Saying it found “no verifiable evidence” of a violation, a special ethics committee has all but killed a complaint filed against a Maplewood City Council member.

On Thursday, the panel recommended dismissal of all four counts of a complaint filed against Chasity Mattox, who was elected in April to represent the 2nd Ward.

The complaint was filed by Brad Jackson, who was appointed by Mayor Nikylan Knapper to both the city’s Plan and Zoning Commission and the sustainability committee.

Jackson alleged that since taking office in April, Mattox had disrupted and interfered with city operations, caused residents and employees to be harassed and had used abusive language.

The special panel — consisting of Knapper and council members Shawn Faulkingham and Matt Coriell — found that “no verifiable evidence was presented” to substantiate Jackson’s allegations.

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“We, the members of the ethics review committee, find (Mattox) is not in violation of the Code of Ethics and recommend dismissal of all charges,” the panel’s signed statement said.

“I feel like I can breathe again,” Mattox said Friday, adding that she believed the complaint was without merit. “It was just a retaliatory move.”

The incident leading to the complaint against Mattox occurred on the night of Dec. 12, shortly after Mattox cast the only vote against hiring Amber Withycombe, an ally of Knapper, as the new city manager. The mayor abstained from voting on Withycombe’s hiring.

Mattox said Jackson made disparaging personal remarks about her after she cast the dissenting vote.

The post from Jackson on a Maplewood community Facebook page was taken down by the page moderator, who then blocked Jackson from the site.

W. Bevis Schock, Mattox’s attorney, said the ethics panel finding is binding unless Jackson decides to appeal it to the full council.



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.

Jackson could not be reached Friday for comment. In the comments section of **the Post-Dispatch**, Jackson said he was “not disappointed” with the panel’s ruling.

David Carson, Post-Dispatch

“We knew it would turn out this way. The evidence was not enough, but censure was never the point. The point was that conduct matters,” Jackson wrote.

Still pending, however, is a complaint that Mattox filed against Jackson, which Mattox said on Friday she intends to pursue.

As to Mattox’s complaint, Knapper said the city is talking with its lawyers about how to handle a complaint against an appointed official such as Jackson. While city ordinances outline a process for complaints against elected officials, Knapper said it is silent about such issues with appointed officials.

Knapper said the matter is slated for discussion during the work session of the Jan. 9 council meeting.

Mattox has come under increased criticism recently because of her opposition to the **hiring of Withycombe** — who started Thursday as city manager.

Her salary has been set at \$157,000 a year, according to her employment contract with the city.

Withycombe is a close ally of Knapper, who has appointed both Withycombe and her husband, Joshua Kryah, to several city commissions. Kryah also served at one time as Knapper’s campaign treasurer.

Withycombe has no experience working for a municipality and still is in the process of earning a master’s degree in public administration.

Critics have lambasted the hiring, noting that the job was not posted in any professional publications or on the city’s website. The candidates were selected solely on the recommendations of council members, and only one person other than Withycombe was interviewed for the job.

The previous city manager was Michael Reese, who resigned in October and was paid about \$130,000 to leave his job without comment. Several sources have said that a contentious working relationship between Knapper and Reese led to his departure.

Along with the \$157,000 annual salary, Withycombe also will be given use of a city-owned vehicle for work-related travel.

The contract is valid for three years, with salary increases after Withycombe's first and second years on the job to be determined by the city council and be based on an annual performance review.

After the council voted to hire Withycombe on Dec. 12, council member Faulkingham, who is the city's deputy mayor, said Withycombe's salary was still being negotiated.

The employment contract provided by the city through a Missouri Sunshine Law records request showed that Withycombe signed the agreement on Dec. 12, and that the mayor signed it on Dec. 13.



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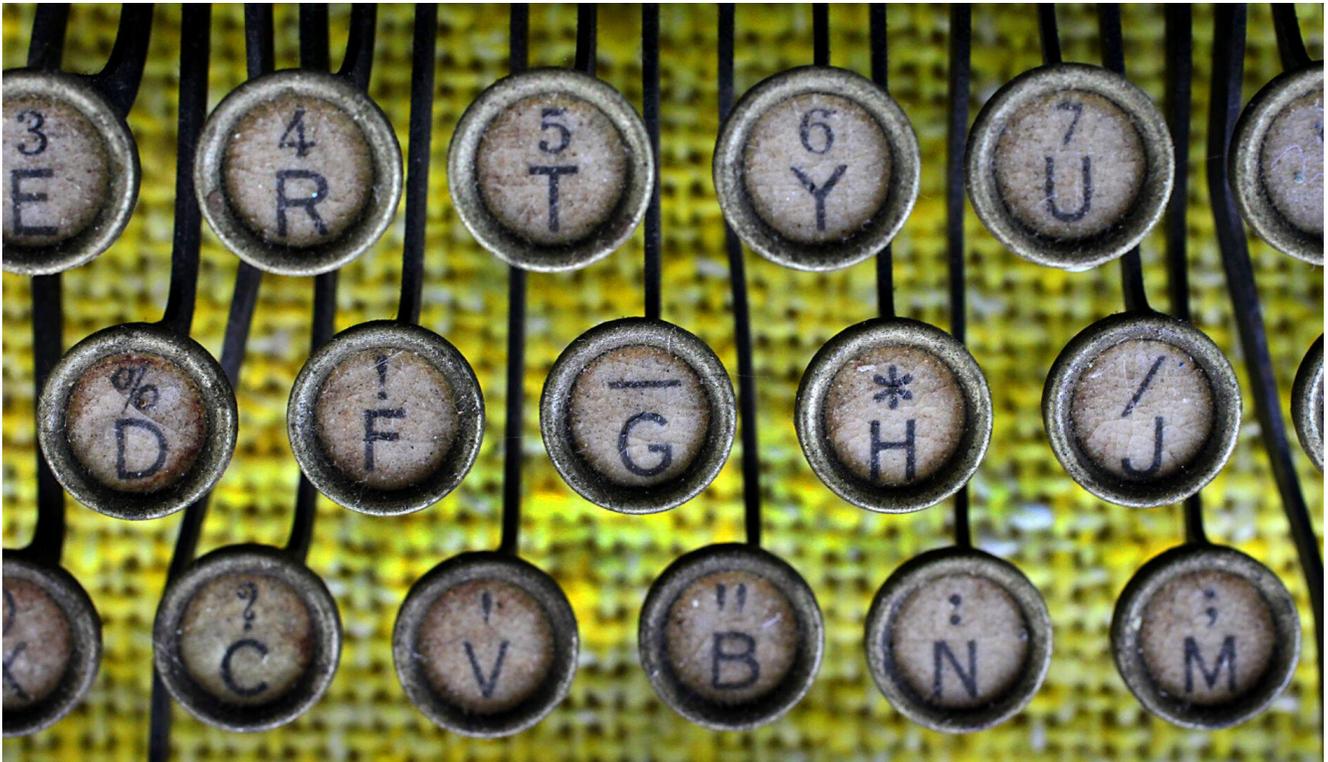
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