

Fired CEO to St. Pete housing board: Give me \$157-K job running your non-profit and I won't sue

Tony Love's attorney tells the agency that fired him he wants full salary and benefits through 2020. The board rejects his offer.

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Less than a month after being fired, former St. Petersburg Housing Authority CEO Tony Love wants the agency to give him a job running its development nonprofit at the same \$157,000 salary. That offer, part of ongoing negotiations over his severance, was rejected by the agency's board.

Love administered the nonprofit, essentially a legal entity, as part of his regular duties as CEO.

His demands don't end there. In his new role, Love also wants to receive the same benefits he enjoyed as CEO. Those include a \$700 monthly car allowance, medical and dental insurance, pension and 30 days paid leave. His requested new contract would run through December 2020.

The request is part of a negotiation over Love's exit from the agency. Under his last contract, he can only receive severance if he agrees not to sue for wrongful dismissal.

Acting on legal advice, board members did not comment on the offer but voted unanimously to reject it at a specially convened meeting Friday.

"The board did not find that to be a reasonable offer," board chairwoman Stephanie Owens said Tuesday.

The agency's board fired Love, 63, on Aug. 30 after he placed himself on medical leave without informing Owens, who is his boss.

But there were other concerns. He used agency funds to pay his personal attorney during negotiations for a new contract. There is an investigation into whether he created a hostile work environment at the Housing Authority. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development conducted a review of the agency after it spent at least \$27,000 on a failed lawsuit against St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Kriseman.

Owens said the agency is waiting to hear back from Love's attorney.

Hale did not return calls or emails seeking comment. Love declined to speak with a reporter.

Harris said in his email that Hale had not indicated what grounds Love would have for a wrongful dismissal. One possible tactic would be to sue claiming the agency violated the Family Medical Leave Act, which allows eligible employees to take unpaid leave with the right to reinstatement.

Owens said she had discussed that possibility with Housing Authority attorneys.

"They feel very confident he wasn't under the Family Medical Leave Act," Owens said.

Love's wish to continue as The Rise Development's president would allow him to stay involved with the redevelopment of Jordan Park. The housing authority is partnering with Norstar Development on the project.

ST. PETERSBURG — Less than a month after he lost his \$157,000 a year job as chief executive of the St. Petersburg Housing Authority, Tony Love wants the board that fired him to let him run the agency's nonprofit group for exactly the same salary.

If the board doesn't agree, his attorney warned, he is considering legal action.

The unusual ultimatum was made by Love's attorney Marion Hale in a recent phone call to Charley Harris, the agency's legal counsel, emails show.

It says that Love would agree not to sue if he is hired as the president and sole employee for the Rise Development Corp., a nonprofit group the agency established in 2016 to partner with developers on new public and affordable housing. Love administered the nonprofit, essentially a legal entity, as part of his regular duties as CEO.

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The Florida Housing Finance Corp. recently awarded the project tax credits worth an estimated \$18 million, a success that Owens attributed to the work of consultants, not Love. The agency board also serves as the board for Rise. They voted Friday to remove Love's name from state documents that list him as one of the officers of the non-profit.

"For some reason I don't understand Mr. Love wants very much to remain part of the Jordan Park development even though he hasn't been instrumental in any of the elements thus far," Owens said.

The Authority provides housing and administers housing vouchers for about 4,000 low-income families. It has 42 employees and handles more than \$30 million in payments from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Love joined the agency as CEO in 2016 and enjoyed strong backing from board members, with pay raises of 7 and 5 percent in 2017 and 2018.

But a series of reports earlier this year by the *Tampa Bay Times* revealed problems at the agency.

Some board members voted on Love's first pay raise without being told about employee reports that he bullied and shouted at staff.

Another story revealed that Love lived rent-free for nine months in an apartment designated as housing for low-income families. That prompted federal officials to cite the agency, and led Kriseman to recommend City Council remove three members of the board. Two other board members were replaced when Kriseman declined to reappoint them to second terms..

Board members facing removal were among those who authorized the agency to sue Kriseman and the city of St. Petersburg to try and halt the process. A judge quickly dismissed the case. A separate lawsuit filed individually by the three board members is ongoing.



The bungalows of Jordan Park sit empty behind a gate put up to enclose the properties due to be demolished as part of the redevelopment of Jordan Park. The project is being financed through a partnership between the St. Petersburg Housing Authority and Norstar Development.

[MARTHA ASECIO RHINE | Tampa Bay Times]