

Three housing board members removed by vote

The St. Petersburg City Council does so as a result of charges of neglect and misconduct.

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ST. PETERSBURG - Three St. Petersburg Housing Authority board members were removed from office Thursday for their roles

in allowing the chief executive officer to live in the agency's own low-income housing for free, failing to follow the state's Government in the Sunshine law and other issues with their oversight of the agency responsible for providing housing for the city's poorest families.

City Council members voted to accept the recommendation of Mayor Rick Kriseman to remove the housing agency's board chairman, Harry Harvey, and board members Delphinia Davis and Ann Sherman White.

The mayor made that recommendation after a city report found those board members committed six counts of either misconduct, neglect or inefficiency. One count was against Harvey and Davis for failing to disclose to other board members reports from senior staff complaining that chief Tony Love shouted and bullied them before the full board voted to raise Love's pay.

Sherman White was removed in part because she voted on that pay raise even though the board was not given a copy of Love's evaluation, on which the pay increase was supposed to be based. She also missed 40 percent of the agency's regularly scheduled meetings last year. The Housing Authority also failed to provide the city with annual progress reports as required by state law, even after city leaders reminded them of that obligation in 2016.

What most galled some council members was the board's role in allowing Love to stay rent-free in an apartment designated for low-income families. He also used agency funds to pay his furniture and electric bills while earning a \$140,000 salary.

The home could have been used by a needy family and allowing the CEO to stay there for nine months amounted to misuse of the agency's property, the city's report stated.

'To me this really is so troubling and so embarrassing and really epitomizes how tone-deaf the executive director and some of the commissioners have become,' Council member Darden Rice said.

Last month the Housing Authority filed a lawsuit to try and block the removal of those members. But this week a circuit judge decided not to intervene before Thursday's vote.

None of the three board members nor their attorney, Ross Nabatoff, attended the council meeting to speak in their defense. Only a handful of residents spoke at the hearing, most in support of the three board members.

NAACP St. Petersburg president Maria Scruggs called the city's actions as 'an egregious attempt of tyranny.' In recent weeks, she has accused the city of wanting to take control of the housing agency and its redevelopment of Jordan Park.

'To take an action that will dismantle the St. Petersburg Housing Authority puts this project in jeopardy,' she said. 'It's a direct impact on low-income residents in south St. Petersburg, the majority of whom happen to be African-American.' Basha Jordan Jr., the grandson of Elder Jordan, after whom Jordan Park is named, became so animated that he continued shouting at council after his allotted three minutes elapsed. He also served on the housing agency board until March, when Kriseman declined to reappoint him and former board member Jo Ann Nesbitt to second terms.

'I am concerned about this whole process,' Basha Jordan said. 'I look at it as a complete smokescreen for the powers that be to want to have total control of the Housing Authority.' State law gives a mayor the authority to appoint or remove board members with the approval of city council. Other than that, the agency is autonomous. The only oversight is provided by the agency's seven board members, and Kriseman has already appointed two members and will soon appoint three more.

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The St. Petersburg City Council voted to remove, from left, the housing agency's board chairman, Harry Harvey, and board members Delphinia Davis and Ann Sherman White.

The removal of three of Love's staunchest supporters has fueled speculation about his future. In February, the mayor said he would be looking to fill the board with people who are 'equally troubled by Mr. Love's job performance.' Kriseman ordered a review of the agency board's performance after a *Tampa Bay Times* investigation found it approved a 7 percent pay raise for Love in 2017 even though some members complained they hadn't seen his evaluation.

The *Times* also found that in 2016, Love lived rent-free for nine months in an apartment designated for low-income families and used

agency funds to pay for his furniture and electric bills despite his six-figure salary.

Love said his stay in a low-income apartment was in lieu of his contract's relocation package, which required the agency to pay his rent for six months. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development didn't agree and cited the agency for misuse of low-income housing.