

Five missteps that led to the removal of St. Petersburg Housing Authority board members

A series of controversies has eroded confidence in the housing agency.

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City Hall veterans can't remember officials ever removing a St. Petersburg Housing Authority board member from office. Now Mayor Rick Kriseman has replaced five of the seven-member voluntary board in just the past three months including three who were removed from office Thursday. Here's a look at the missteps that have dogged the agency over the past year:

1. Relocation of residents from Jordan Park



The bungalows of Jordan Park sit empty behind a gate put up to enclose the properties.

The Housing Authority's plan to demolish rather than renovate the last original structures of the historic African-American community was controversial enough. Then it relocated about 31 families from the complex even though there was no financing in place to redevelop it. Displaced residents complained they had been moved into deplorable housing, leading prominent community leaders including School Board Chairwoman Renee Flowers and City Council member Lisa

Wheeler-Bowman to call for new board members that would challenge agency CEO Tony Love.

2. Charging its own board member for public records



St. Petersburg Housing Authority board member Terri Lipsey Scott received an email from the agency she oversees stating she must pay up to \$400 for records she wants to review. The agency said her list of 14 different requests would take considerable staff time to produce. Other Tampa Bay housing authorities say they provide board members any records free of charge. CHRIS URSO | Times

Housing Authority board members, who are charged with overseeing the agency, serve on a voluntary basis. So Terri Lipsey Scott was outraged when she was told in January she would have to pay as much as \$400 for agency records including minutes of meetings, staff evaluations of Love, and travel and legal invoices. By the time St. Petersburg City Council Chairman Charlie Gerdes decided he would intervene and pay for the records, the cost had risen to \$900. The agency eventually returned Gerdes' check and provided Scott the records for free.

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3. Allowing CEO Tony Love to live for nine months in low-income housing



St. Petersburg Housing Authority CEO Tony Love lived in a second-floor unit at Saratoga Apartments for nine months in 2016. The agency was originally required to pay his rent for six months as part of his relocation package. It also paid for \$3,000 in furniture and his monthly electric bills.

When it hired Love in 2016, the Housing Authority agreed to pay his rent for six months as part of a relocation package. Love, instead, decided it made more sense for him to live in a vacant agency apartment than for the Housing Authority to pay for a privately owned one. He moved into a

complex restricted to low-income families. Love, who at the time was earning \$140,000, also billed the agency \$3,000 to furnish the apartment and \$625 for his electric bills, items that were not listed in his relocation benefits. The perk didn't end after six months. Board members retroactively agreed to extend his stay for an extra three months. A *Tampa Bay Times* report exposing the misuse of agency resources led to the agency being cited by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in March.

4. Failing to disclose complaints about the CEO to board members voting on his \$10,000 pay raise

St. Petersburg Housing Authority CEO Tony Love was awarded a \$10,000 raise in 2017. Some board members said they were never shown his evaluation but voted for the raise nonetheless.



Love's first evaluation as agency CEO was conducted in 2017 by the agency's personnel committee, which included board members Harry Harvey and Delphinia Davis. It included questionnaires filled in by about eight senior agency staffers about their boss. At least two of employees described a leader who bullied and belittled his workers and ordered some to work on preparations for his fraternity's golf event. The complaints were serious enough for the agency to pay \$3,600 for a consultant to work with Love on his people skills. But none of those reports nor the consultant's report were forwarded to other board members who were asked later that year to approve raising Love's yearly salary to \$150,000. Board members approved the hike even though some questioned how they could vote on an evaluation they hadn't seen.

5. Board members held emergency meeting in violation of Florida's "Government in the Sunshine" act

With Kriseman's pledge to remove three board members hanging over them, Board Chairman Harvey scheduled an emergency meeting April 10 for the board to authorize taking legal action against the city. Ironically, the meeting ended up making its way into the "charges" the city used to justify removing Harvey and Ann Sherman White from office.

The only public notice of the meeting was made to board members via an email sent by Love at 7:14 p.m. the night before it took place. State law says "reasonable notice" must be made to the public before such meetings are held, and that they must be open to the public. The meeting was attended by only three board members, too few to establish a quorum required by state law for board action. Nonetheless, the board voted to authorize suing the city. Concern about the legality of the action led agency attorney Charley Harris to recommend the board redo the vote at its next regular board meeting.