

TAMPA BAY

St. Pete City Council approves first board member replacement at embattled housing authority

James Dates was encouraged to be “bold and courageous.”

Florida Politics (blog) By Janelle Irwin Taylor on May 30, 2019

St. Petersburg City Council’s Housing, Land Use and Transportation Committee on Wednesday approved the first of three new board members to the city’s Housing Authority.

James Dates, regional vice president for WestCare Gulf Coast in St. Petersburg, is the first appointee to replace ousted board members following an agency scandal.

WestCare is a statewide social services agency that provides a variety of services ranging from substance abuse and addiction to transitional housing.

Dates also previously served as the Assistant County Administrator for Pinellas County.

“Your resume is very impressive. When I read it, it was a series of ‘wow’ type of experiences,” City Council member Ed Montanari said, echoing other members of council.

But Dates has a tough road ahead as a volunteer board member for the authority. St. Pete City Council ousted three board members earlier this month after a series of controversies rocked the agency.

Board members allowed the agency’s CEO, Tony Love, to live rent free in a unit meant for low-income housing despite the leader’s \$140,000 income. They also approved a raise for Love despite ongoing complaints about his management style and failed to follow certain procedural guidelines.

“This is a time where there are opportunities for new leadership to emerge for the agency. It’s not going to be easy but I’m confident you see how the work can be rewarding,” City Council member Gina Driscoll said.

Another council member, Charlie Gerdes, asked Dates to promise him to be “bold and courageous” with housing authority leadership to ensure its constituents are better served than they have been in the past.

“I’ve been in elected office for 7 ½ years and one of the saddest experiences that I’ve had was to find out that residents of housing provided by the St. Petersburg Housing Authority were afraid that if they brought something up, or complained, or were negative in any way, that they would be shown the door very quickly,” Gerdes said.

Dates said his first move would be to improve transparency and access in the community.

“I’ve taken some time to review minutes I could find. They’re kind of scant,” Dates said. “These meetings are really inconvenient for the residents. I think that’s where you start.”

City Council member Steve Kornell said he hoped Dates and whoever else joins the board after him will work to ensure the inspection process for public housing improves.

One of his constituents “has five children and is homeless, living in a van, and has a section 8 voucher,” Kornell said.

“The house was so bad that she chose to live in the van,” Kornell said. “I just think everything I’ve seen about you and heard about you leads me to believe that you’ll go in and do well.”



Jordan Park affordable housing was at the center of debate over three embattled St. Pete Housing Authority board members.