

Feds eye housing agency

The St. Petersburg **Housing Authority** faces a review over suits against mayor, city.
Times Staff Writer, Christopher O'Donnell, Tampa Bay Times | June 28, 2019

The St. Petersburg Housing Authority faces a federal review of its spending after it failed to notify the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that it was suing Mayor Rick Kriseman and the city of St. Petersburg. Housing Authority CEO Tony Love should have told the department about the lawsuit, federal officials said, which is required to prevent housing authorities from wasting federal funds intended to help housing for low-income families.

Instead, the Housing Authority board - which authorized the lawsuit with the votes of three members that Kriseman planned to remove from office - filed it at the end of April. It was quickly dismissed by a judge in the city's favor, leaving the Housing Authority with at least \$27,000 in legal fees. Concerned that federal dollars would be used to cover those legal costs, the agency ordered the Housing Authority to obtain advance approval before drawing upon any government funds. Federal officials also plan to review the Housing Authority's operations and expenditures, said Ellis Wilson-Henri, the department's public housing regional director for the southeast.

'We have been closely watching what has been transpiring here, quietly watching,' Wilson-Henri said at the Housing Authority's board meeting Thursday. 'I've asked for a review of the Housing Authority to make sure the new board starts out with a clean slate.' Love did not attend the meeting. He took a medical leave starting Wednesday.

Housing Authority chief financial officer Dennis Lohr told the *Tampa Bay Times* that no federal funds were used to pay legal costs. He said it used revenue generated from rent collected from two affordable housing complexes.

The lawsuit was filed in an attempt to prevent Kriseman from removing board members Harry Harvey, Delphinia Davis and Ann Sherman-White from office. State law gives the mayor the authority to recommend to City Council who should be appointed and removed from the Housing Authority board. Removal is permitted in cases of 'inefficiency or neglect of duty or misconduct in office.' Housing Authority legal counsel Charley Harris, an attorney with the Trenam Law firm in St. Petersburg, recommended to board members that the agency go to court to protect its autonomy, saying it was clear Kriseman planned to appoint new board members who would carry out his wish to fire Love.

The Housing Authority's legal argument got short shrift from Pinellas-Pasco Circuit Judge Patricia Muscarella, who dismissed the case - and expressed puzzlement that the case was brought to her court. The housing agency paid almost \$18,000 to the Tampa law firm of Johnson, Cassidy, Newlon, and DeCort to sue the city, according to invoices obtained in a public records request. There may be more invoices awaiting payment. Trenam Law has also billed the Housing Authority about \$11,500 for work done on the case, invoices show.

The flurry of legal action has already drained the Housing Authority's annual legal budget for 2019. Board members on Thursday decided against increasing that budget until they have had the chance to review all of the agency's legal expenses. New Housing Authority board chairwoman Stephanie Owens expressed her concerns about the legal advice the board had received in the past. 'Our legal support has been less than stellar,' she told Harris.

The St. Petersburg City Council approved Kriseman's recommendation to remove the three from office after a review of a city report that detailed six allegations that the members were engaged in either misconduct, neglect or inefficiency. One of the allegations is that the Housing Authority board allowed Love to live rent-free for nine months in an apartment for low-income families. One count was against Harvey and Davis for failing to disclose to other board members reports from senior staff complaining that Love shouted and bullied them - before the full board voted to raise Love's pay.

Sherman-White also missed 40 percent of the agency's regularly scheduled meetings last year. Housing Authority board members voted Thursday not to appeal Muscarella's decision or to file an amended lawsuit, effectively ending the agency's legal challenge against Kriseman, who has already filled one of the three vacancies.

But the former board members are still seeking to be reinstated through a separate lawsuit filed on their behalf by Washington D.C. lawyer Ross Nabatoff. It's unclear who is paying their legal bills.