

Incoming Richmond council members support anti-corruption reforms in wake of Jones report

By NED OLIVER Richmond Times-Dispatch | Posted: Sunday, December 4, 2016 10:30 pm

Members of the incoming Richmond City Council expressed broad agreement last week that new anti-corruption policies should be put in place following the conclusion of a 10-month investigation into Mayor Dwight C. Jones.

“I think we’re at a pivotal point here in Richmond in terms of bringing public confidence back in city government, so I think this is an opportunity for us to change how things have been done in the past,” said Kristen Larson, who won election last month to replace outgoing Councilwoman Kathy C. Graziano representing Forest Hill, Westover Hills and Stony Point.

Richmond Commonwealth’s Attorney Michael N. Herring announced Wednesday that he didn’t find evidence to support criminal charges against Jones, who had been battling suspicions that he directed city resources toward construction for the church where he serves as senior pastor.

But Herring said Jones’ behavior “smacks of cronyism” and hurt public trust in city government. Herring offered two proposed policies he said could avoid the future appearance of conflicts of interest:

First, he said elected officials and agency heads should be required to publicly disclose any personal relationship with a potential executive-level employee prior to a hiring decision being made. Second, he said that if city vendors do business privately with a city employee who has decision-making authority, that also should be disclosed publicly. He said he couldn’t “imagine any feasible argument against disclosure.”

So far, the city’s incoming mayor, Levar Stoney, has been silent on Herring’s recommendations. Stoney declined to comment through a spokesman.

However, eight of nine members of the incoming council said in interviews and in emails that they think the city should pursue reforms.

“It’s a very reasonable proposal and one that I think we can adopt,” said Councilman Chris A. Hilbert, who represents North Richmond.

Councilwoman-elect Kimberly Gray, who will represent the Fan District, echoed Hilbert: “I absolutely support those recommendations,” she said.

Councilwoman Reva M. Trammell, who represents South Richmond’s 8th District, said Jones’ actions shook residents’ faith in the city and called on him to apologize . She said Herring’s recommendations



20161111_MET_MAYO_DH03

Richmond Mayor-elect Levar Stoney (left) hasn’t commented on recommendations for anti-corruption measures following an investigation of Mayor Dwight C. Jones.

might help rebuild that confidence.

“If that’s what Michael Herring suggested, yes,” she said, “because I have all the confidence and faith in him.”

Andreas Addison, who will replace Councilman Jonathan T. Baliles representing the West End, said even the appearance of cronyism is enough to warrant action on the part of the council.

“If there are opportunities to address these concerns and limit any loopholes through policy, I support pursuing the best and most appropriate measures needed to strengthen and restore the trust the public has in its government,” Addison said in an email.

Even as they said they support Herring’s suggestions, several council members said that crafting any new policy will require significant discussion: They said it might prove difficult to adequately define what, for example, qualifies as a personal relationship that would require disclosure.

Councilwoman Ellen F. Robertson, whose district stretches from North Richmond to downtown and Manchester, said she’s already discussed the new policies with the city attorney’s office, human resources and the procurement department.

“What they have suggested to us is that the overall recommendation is a good recommendation. However, we really need to look at the specifics to better define what it means,” she said. “We do not want to violate any of our policies as it relates to hiring or procurement.”

Michael Jones, who will replace Councilwoman Michelle R. Mosby representing a large swath of South Richmond, said “disclosure is never a bad thing,” but he said he would need to investigate more to make sure any requirements don’t violate job candidates’ civil liberties.

Councilman Parker C. Agelasto, whose district covers parts of the Fan, Oregon Hill and Swansboro, made a similar point: “Let’s hypothetically say I’m a member of a fraternity. Is that a disclosure? I’m in church with you. Is that a disclosure?”

Councilwoman Cynthia I. Newbille, who represents the East End, did not respond to an email or phone call seeking comment.

The council members interviewed said they hoped to take action on the issue in the first three to six months of their four-year terms.