As Tishaura Jones Makes History, She Promises Change For St. Louis

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Tishaura Jones is sworn in as St. Louis' 47th mayor Tuesday.

Near the end of cementing the designation of becoming the first Black woman to serve as the mayor of St. Louis, Tishaura Jones capped off a speech of ambitious plans and transformative hopes fairly simply.
Tuesday. "I use the she/her pronouns. And I am the mayor of the city of St. Louis."

The swearing-in of Jones, a former state lawmaker and treasurer of St. Louis, was not only a milestone for Black women in St. Louis politics, it was a shifting of several decades of political philosophies in the mayor's office.

But even Jones acknowledged that wholesale change in a city that’s long wrestled with population decline, crime, economic hallowing and a racial divide won’t come overnight.

"I am not naive in my pursuit of progressive public policy," Jones said. "I am aware that I am walking into an office that is tasked with working to solve some of our most pressing challenges: lack of opportunity for our most vulnerable, a broken criminal justice system, and a fractured reason. I ask for grace, as my team and I combat decades upon decades of disinvestment."

“Our city stands at a pivotal moment in our history,” she added. “The decisions we make over the next four years during our first term as mayor will begin to chart the course for our future.”

Jones spoke often during the campaign about her close working relationships with leaders throughout the region and the state, and a roster of speakers, including Kansas City Mayor Quinton Lucas and County Executive Sam Page, bore that out.

“The reasons that have entrenched separate directions for the city and the county must be finally named,” said Page, who had an often tense relationship with Jones’ predecessor. “Two
said: ‘St. Louis, this is an opportunity for us to rise. We are done avoiding tough conversations. We are done ignoring the racism that has held this city and our region back.’”

Lucas said Jones will be a mayor who won't be ashamed to say she's “a mayor for the people.”

“A mayor who is not ashamed to say that we are going to shake the foundations of all the things we know in our community,” Lucas said. “A mayor who is not ashamed to say that she will stand up for people in every walk of life, in every neighborhood, no matter the battle, no matter how tough.”

Coronavirus restrictions made for a somewhat muted ceremony. But despite a smaller crowd, and everyone in masks, the historic nature of the moment shined through.

Jones was flanked on the City Hall staircases by members of the St. Louis Board of Aldermen, including the woman she defeated earlier this month — Cara Spencer of the 20th Ward. She was also joined by her sisters in the Delta Sigma Theta sorority, in signature red outfits.

“Today serves as a reminder of what our city can be when we summon the best within ourselves and come together around a positive vision of change and opportunity for all in our city,” Jones said.

With Comptroller Darlene Green also taking the oath of office for a seventh full term, the board that controls the city's budget will for the first time in history have three Black members — Green, Jones and Board of Aldermen President Lewis Reed.

In her remarks after being sworn in by U.S. District Judge Ronnie White, Green said she was grateful to have a seat at the executive branch of government — where she promised to showcase “courage” and keep a watchful eye over the city's taxpayer dollars. She also pledged to fight for bolstered public safety measures and a push to “rebuild north St. Louis.”

“For me, what matters is having good judgment, a high moral code and a focus on doing right for the taxpayer,” Green said. “And I know it takes courage to win at standing your ground and standing for something. In the end, courage wins the day every day. St. Louis, I have kept my promises to you to be fiscally responsible to you and accountable with your tax dollars.”
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David Kovaluk

St. Louis Mayor Tishaura Jones speaks at her inauguration Tuesday in City Hall.

Changing of the guard

Jones' swearing-in is a milestone for Black women involved in St. Louis politics. Black women have long played influential roles in regional politics, but Jones' election also marked another point in St. Louis history: the unofficial end to a powerful coalition that former Mayor Francis Slay cultivated that banded together the business community and some organized labor groups. That political faction was dominant for nearly two decades but began to wane after former St. Louis County Executive Steve Stenger resigned from office while facing criminal charges — and completed its freefall when Board of Aldermen President Lewis Reed failed to make it to the April general election.

Some of what Jones has promised during the campaign goes against what Slay and outgoing Mayor Lyda Krewson advocated for during their time in office. She's pledged to close the St. Louis Medium Security Institution, known as the Workhouse. And she's pushed back against the idea that the best way to fight crime is to increase funding for police. She's advocated to shift resources to social workers and other personnel who can deal with the root causes of crime.

"Why do we live in a city where a police department is supposedly understaffed but is larger than any other city our size?" Jones asked during her speech. "Why do people who look like...

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One of Jones’ immediate challenges is how the city spends more than $500 million from federal coronavirus relief funding. Jones won’t have unlimited authority to make decisions on where that money should be spent, as she’ll also need buy-in from either Reed or Green on the powerful Board of Estimate and Apportionment.

Elected officials like state Rep. Rasheen Aldridge believe that the federal funds present an unprecedented opportunity to invest in the infrastructure of north St. Louis, a largely Black part of the city that’s struggled for decades with crime and disinvestment.

“I live on a block where I don’t have a sidewalk,” said Aldridge, a St. Louis Democrat who is also the 5th Ward committeeman. “I live on a block where there’s houses falling down. It’s giving young people hope that their community can look just like other communities. They don’t have to travel and go far to get resources in their neighborhood.”

Jones will also need help from a Board of Aldermen that’s often fractured in multiple directions depending on the issue. The ability of Jones to instill major policy change will depend on banding together factions that don’t always see eye to eye.

Alderwoman Shameem Hubbard of the 26th Ward said she’s hoping that Jones follows through on some of the key tenets of her campaign, which include “transparency, inclusion and, most of all, change.”

“This is the time for radical collaboration,” said Hubbard, who noted that both Jones and Green live in the ward that she represents on the Board of Aldermen. “All of our problems are regional. All of our problems are not just city of St. Louis problems. We are now going to be dealing with an administration that ran on being collaborative. That is radical. And I think being able to work with people that you might not have worked with before or in the past is radical — and that’s what we need right now.”
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Rachel Lippmann

Alderwoman Shameem Clark Hubbard, 26th Ward, pins a boutonnière to the jacket of Alderwoman Anne Schweitzer, 13th Ward. Schweitzer was one of four new aldermen sworn in Tuesday.

Board of Aldermen

Four new members joined the ranks of the Board of Aldermen on Tuesday as the legislative body met in person for the first time since March of last year.

“Those who share this floor might not agree on everything, but I hope we can agree on this: We love our city and the people who live here,” said Alderwoman Anne Schweitzer, who was elected earlier this month to represent the 13th Ward. “They put us here and we are here to listen to and serve them. These are their seats. We are just sitting in them.”

The election of James Page in the 5th Ward, Bill Stephens in the 12th, Schweitzer in the 13th and Tina Pihl in the 17th gives progressives on the board a working but fragile majority. And Pihl and Stephens will join Shane Cohn of the 25th Ward as members of the board’s informal LGBTQ caucus. Until Tuesday, Cohn was the lone member of the board who is openly a member of the LGBTQ community.

Officials had initially planned to hold the swearings-in outdoors, but a forecast of snow and temperatures in the 40s forced a change in plans. The 16 aldermen who were elected or reelected two weeks ago were allowed to have just one guest. Desks and microphones were spread out, which meant not everyone had a working desk lamp. Despite the chilly weather, the doors in the back of the chambers were partially open to boost air circulation.

A spokeswoman for Reed said virtual meetings will be the norm going forward until all staff
meetings."

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