

Village close to hiring new fire chief

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Police and Fire Commission pares four finalists to one, paving way for Village Board to negotiate salary

Grafton's first full-time fire chief is expected to be hired in the next few weeks.

After evaluating four finalists for the position, the Police and Fire Commission narrowed the search to one applicant who is undergoing the last round of tests and a background check, officials said this week.

"We are in the final stages of the search for a full-time chief," Robert Poull, commission chairman, told the Village Board on Monday.

In an update on filling the position, Poull said the commission narrowed its choice to one candidate after interviewing finalists May 20. Because one of the four applicants withdrew from consideration after accepting another job, only three were interviewed.

The four finalists were Howard Perry, assistant chief with the Beech Park, Ill., Fire Department; Kent Hulett, former chief of the Chippewa Fire District; Bill Rice, deputy chief of the Wauwatosa Fire Department; and James Taylor, battalion chief of the Menomonee Falls Fire Department.

The name of the applicant chosen by the commission will not be announced until the Village Board finalizes his salary and benefits through negotiation, Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said.

Poull said the four finalists were evaluated through an in-house assessment process before the May 20 interviews. The commission's choice will now undergo a criminal background check and psychological testing before moving into negotiations, he said.

During the search for a full-time chief, John Place, who has been Grafton's part-time fire chief since 2010, has continued to serve in an interim capacity. Last week, the Village Board approved paying Place \$1,000 per month, retroactive to January, for his interim role.

During Poull's appearance before the board Monday, Trustee Susan Meinecke questioned why the commission had not asked Place to interview for the full-time position and why the commission had not gotten more input from Place and other department members in the search for a chief.

"This is still a volunteer department that's been around since 1896. The new chief will have to work with these members," Meinecke said.

Poull said Place provided input to the commission even though he has not been directly involved in interviewing or evaluating applicants.

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“The role of the Police and Fire Commission is to take all politics out of the process,” Poull said.

Even so, Meinecke said the department should have been more involved in the selection of its new leader. “I think this is a legitimate concern,” she said.

Village Attorney Mike Herbrand said state law requires the Police and Fire Commission to act as an independent body that oversees hiring and firing personnel.

“Independent is fine. Omnipotent, I have a problem with,” Meinecke responded.

Trustee Jim Grant said fire department members could have played a role in selecting the chief.

“My preference is to get input from people who have served, but I’m not on the Police and Fire Commission,” he said.

Hofland said results of the criminal background check and psychological tests will be forwarded to the commission as soon as they are completed. Pending the outcome of negotiations, the new chief could be hired in the next 30 days, he said.

In approving a November referendum to upgrade the all-volunteer fire department, village and town residents agreed that a full-time chief should be hired. The village began advertising the position nationally in late January and accepted applications until late February.

Voters agreed to spend \$410,000 more annually for a full-time chief, to have part-time emergency medical technicians on call from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. and provide per-call payments of \$20 for firefighters and emergency medical responders.

The salary range for the new chief will be \$68,703 to \$87,068. With benefits, total compensation could be as much as \$105,000.

In addition to approving Place’s pay as interim chief, the Village Board last week agreed to pay shift commanders at the fire department \$4 per hour.