

Hiring of full-time fire chief tabled

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Wauwatosa official is Police and Fire Commission's choice, but Village Board holds off approving compensation package

The Grafton Police and Fire Commission unveiled its choice for the community's first full-time fire chief Monday, but it will be at least two more weeks before the position is officially filled.

William Rice, one of four finalists for the post, was the unanimous choice of the commission during a joint meeting with the Village Board. However, after holding a one-hour closed session to consider a compensation package for Rice, the board tabled his hiring.

In a motion announced by Village Administrator Darrell Hofland, the board asked the commission "to reaffirm its selection of the applicant based on the criteria for the position."

Village President Jim Brunquell said tentative plans call for the board to reconsider the compensation package later this month.

"Hopefully, we will discuss this at our next Village Board meeting (on July 15)," Brunquell said.

Rice, deputy chief of the Wauwatosa Fire Department, was chosen by the five-member commission following a search that began last November. The search, which included advertising the position nationally, attracted 18 applicants.

The commission pared the field to Rice and three other finalists: Howard Perry, assistant chief with the Beech Park, Ill., Fire Department; Kent Hulett, former chief of the Chippewa Fire District; and James Taylor, battalion chief of the Menomonee Falls Fire Department.

One of the four withdrew from consideration after accepting another job, leaving the commission to consider three finalists. They were evaluated through an in-house assessment process, interviewed by the commission and underwent background checks and psychological tests.

Before the Village Board went into closed session, Commission Chairman Robert Poull said Rice was the commission's clear-cut choice for the job.

"Our candidate was at the top of the list all the way," Poull said.

Brunquell thanked the commission for its work. "It appears you've gone through a legitimate and thorough process," he said.

The hiring of the first full-time chief for the all-volunteer Grafton Fire Department was approved in a November referendum by village and town residents. Voters agreed to spend \$410,000 more annually for the 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.

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The salary range for the new chief is expected to be \$68,703 to \$87,303. However, with benefits, total compensation could be as much as \$105,000.

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. In May, the Village Board approved paying Place \$1,000 per month, retroactive to January, for his interim role.

In June, Hofland said a new chief was expected to be hired within 30 days but that the process did not have a deadline. Since then, trustees Jim Grant, Dave Antoine and Susan Meinecke said they have received complaints from department members and other residents that the department should have had an active role in the hiring process.

Village Attorney Mike Herbrand said state law gives the commission authority to hire, promote and discipline fire and police personnel, but the Village Board has the ultimate power to fill paid positions through budgetary decisions.

Monday's meeting was attended by about a dozen department members. While discussing the hiring process, Poull thanked members for their service.