

Rice hired as first full-time fire chief

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
Wednesday, 17 July 2013 17:45

Wauwatosa deputy chief gets job after Village Board OKs compensation package

William Rice has officially become Grafton's first full-time fire chief.

Ending weeks of speculation, the Village Board on Monday approved a compensation package for Rice, including a starting salary of \$78,000.



The board's decision, on a 4-3 vote, completed a two-part hiring process that began with the Police and Fire Commission unanimously choosing Rice for the job.

Rice, who was selected from four finalists for the newly created position, has been deputy chief of the Wauwatosa Fire Department since 1998. He's also no stranger to Grafton, being a 17-year village resident, former member of the Police and Fire Commission and five-year member of the all-volunteer Grafton Fire Department.

"I'm very excited. It's a great opportunity," Rice said after Monday's meeting.

"I'm looking forward to having the chance to lead the department into a new era."

Rice's hiring was expected to be finalized July 1 at a joint meeting of the Village Board and Police and Fire Commission. However, after meeting in closed session to discuss the compensation package, the board tabled the item and asked the commission to reaffirm its decision.

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The package — including salary, vehicle use, insurance and other benefits — was considered again by the board in closed session Monday before a vote was taken.

Village President Jim Brunnquell and trustees Dave Antoine, David Liss and Lisa Uribe Harbeck voted in favor of the package, with trustees Jim Grant, Richard Rieck and Susan Meinecke opposed.

Before the vote, Grant said he respected the commission's decision but believed the chief's first-year salary should be \$68,703, at the low end of the starting pay scale established by the village.

"I believe he should start at \$68,000 and gain experience and the confidence of the entire community," Grant said. "Unfortunately, I can't vote for this."

Board members congratulated Rice after the vote, wishing him well and thanking the commission and fire department for its patience in the hiring process.

"I appreciate the time that you put into this. I respect your decision," Brunnquell told commission members.

About a dozen members of the Grafton Fire Department attended Monday's meeting and applauded when the board finalized Rice's hiring.

The hiring of Grafton's first full-time fire chief was approved by village and town residents in a November 2012 referendum on upgrading the department. 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.

Those changes were requested by then-Fire Chief John Place, who said the department has struggled to attract and retain members and needed a full-time chief to oversee operations.

The village began advertising the chief's position early this year and attracted 18 applicants. Finalists were evaluated through an in-house assessment process, interviewed by the commission and underwent background checks and psychological tests before Rice was chosen.

Rice began his firefighting career as a volunteer with North Shore suburban departments and has been with the Wauwatosa department since 1987. He earned an associate's degree in fire science and is a graduate of the Executive Fire Officer Program.

Rice said he and his wife Lisa moved to Grafton "because we loved the community." The couple have three adult children.

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Rice has held a variety of leadership roles in Wauwatosa, including planning and managing the department headquarters. He said he's eager to lead Grafton's department in part because of its rich tradition of volunteer service.

"I respect the 117 years the department has had, that's a no-brainer," Rice said.

"It's a great department that has served the community well and will continue to do so."

Directing an all-volunteer department to a new level of service will not be easy, but it's not without precedent, Rice noted.

"What Grafton is going through is happening in many other communities. It's difficult, but it's being done because it's needed," he said.

Rice said he will continue to study similar transitions being made by fire departments in Fitchburg, DeForest and other Wisconsin communities to help Grafton handle its learning curve.

He is expected to begin his new job in the next two weeks.