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Councilor calls for new police chief

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At least one city councilor wants police Chief John Beaudette replaced, while several others said changes have to be made in policy and personnel to end an atmosphere they described as "dysfunctional" and tense.

Mayor John Bell said he had been meeting with Beaudette to "resolve some of these conflicts" and still supports the chief he selected in 2004.

Last month, Beaudette and Lt. Jerris Cook were involved in a confrontation over patrolmen assignments that resulted in physical contact and resulted in the senior officers' union writing a letter to Bell complaining of a hostile environment in the department.

Ward 1 Councilor Jason Grow said he believes Beaudette should be replaced and that some of the higher-ranking officers may have to go as well.

"This is not Beaudette only," Grow said. "It's a dysfunctional culture that's been allowed to fester for far too long, and it's dragging the entire department down."

Others pushed for the mayor to become more involved as the manager of city departments to bring an end to the multiple incidents of strife that have occurred over the last year.

"When tensions get that high, the mayor needs to step in and see what's going on," said Walter Peckham, the Ward 5 councilor. "I've had several policemen come up to me in the last several months saying morale is low because they see tensions between the chief and some officers. It's not a good flowing system."

At-large Councilor Bruce Tobey, a former mayor, said changes and a "collapse of cohesion" have to be addressed by the mayor, who has the authority to appoint the chief and to promote officers within the department.

While he did not say Beaudette should be replaced, Tobey said the lack of progress in addressing conflicts within the department "leads to a diagnosis of a sick organization."

Peckham said he wants to give Beaudette "the chance to explain why it got to that point."

"It could be time for some housecleaning, but everybody deserves the chance to explain themselves," he said.

Bell said he believes Beaudette can do the job because of a passion for the department and for public safety.

"Once I see the chief is going backwards instead of forwards, then I'll have concerns," he said. "

Six of the seven mayoral candidates, including two current city councilors, last week said the mayor should be more involved in calming tensions at the police station. None called for Beaudette's immediate replacement, but suggested he and the mayor's office need better and more open communication.

John Becker, the attorney for the Gloucester Superior Officers Association, said yesterday that while the physical contact is an embarrassing anecdote easily used in the media, Cook and the union are more concerned with a comment Beaudette made at the end of the confrontation where he told Cook, "The gloves are off."

"That's an indication that we don't know what's going to happen next," Becker said.

In the letter he wrote to Bell Sept. 7 on behalf of the association, Becker said Cook felt the chief created "a physically and verbally threatening encounter."

Beaudette confronted Cook Aug. 31 in the watch commander's office after the lieutenant, working a day shift for Lt. Thomas Williams, switched the cruiser beats of two patrolmen during that shift. Cook said the chief physically bumped him.

This complaint is the latest in a string of grievances and other disputes among the mayor, chief and city's police unions, including an incomplete investigation of the department's only black patrolman that cost the city \$175,000 in salary, benefits, a cash settlement and overtime pay to fill his shifts, and claims of favoritism leveled by the patrolmen against the chief.

The superior officers union had filed two grievances in the past over decisions Beaudette made restricting shift-swapping and limiting operational decisions that watch commanders can make. Bell upheld the grievances and blocked Beaudette's changes.

Sgt. John McCarthy sued in federal court Dec. 9, 2005, claiming Bell violated his First Amendment rights by not promoting him to lieutenant in retaliation for his union activities.

The city and McCarthy entered mediation in April, following a scheduled trial date for that month.

An agreement signed by Beaudette and Bell on June 27 and by McCarthy on July 12 will give McCarthy two lump sums totalling \$70,000 and will pay him as a lieutenant - \$62,735 annually - when he is on duty from Jan. 1, 2007 to Jan. 1, 2009. A sergeant's salary is \$56,003. The agreement also promised McCarthy the next vacant lieutenant's position.