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Candidates decry lack of leadership in police turmoil

By Kristen Grieco
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When tensions bubble to the surface in an embarrassing "belly-bumping" confrontation between the police chief and his senior lieutenant, it's time for everyone to sit down and talk, say six candidates for mayor.

Carolyn Kirk, Jeff Worthley, Margaret "Maggie" Rosa, Michael McLeod, James Destino and Francisco A. Sclafani all said the police chief, officers and the mayor must open lines of communication to resolve problems and restore professionalism to the department.

But the candidates disagreed on other points in their diagnoses of the problems that plague the department and on their proposed solutions.

Several blamed the man they want to succeed, Mayor John Bell, for not taking the lead in settling issues that have erupted in a series of clashes between police officers and Chief John Beaudette and Bell.

"Do I blame the mayor? Well, I mean, he is the chief executive officer," said McLeod, a city councilor and retired acting police chief. "If he sees a problem, he should be stepping in."

Bell has had no comment so far on the latest incident between Beaudette and his officers. Last week, the Times reported that the superior officers union sent a letter to Bell accusing Beaudette of "physically" bumping and threatening Lt. Jerris Cook in a confrontation over a staffing decision by the lieutenant.

"Are you bumping me?" Cook demanded to know, according to the letter.

"I just have a big belly," Beaudette replied, the letter said.

"I think the incident exposes a complete lack of professional management from the top down," said School Committee member Kirk. "From the mayor on down. ..."

"When it spills onto the front page of the newspaper in belly-bumping, that is the absolute epitome of poor professional management from the (Police) Department and the mayor's office," Kirk added.

While several candidates said Beaudette shares blame for problems within the department, Worthley was the only one to say that he would be willing to support the chief's removal.

"We have the wrong man at the top for chief," he said, calling Beaudette's behavior "totally unacceptable as a leader."

He said removing a police chief is a lengthy undertaking "and we need to start that process."

But Worthley added that Beaudette should first be given the tools and the opportunity to resolve the issues, working with the mayor.

"If after working with the chief, things don't move forward, then it's time to find a new chief," Worthley said.

All the candidates agreed that improving communication within the department and between the department and the mayor is the first step in solving a problem that Rosa called "embarrassing."

"It's basic common sense. Bring the parties together, see what the problems are and correct them," McLeod said.

Destino and Kirk said the mayor should outline his expectations for the chief and follow through on any consequences if he fails to improve his relationship with his officers.

Rosa said bringing in independent, professional mediators would top her to-do list as mayor.

"It's gone on for far too long," Rosa said of the department's squabbles. "It's a disgrace to the Police Department and the policemen who are doing the best job possible, so I think mediation is clearly called for."

Worthley said ironing out the patrolmen's contract, which is being negotiated, would help ease tensions among police officers who, he said, are feeling underappreciated after having gone without a raise for six years.

Destino said the intradepartmental issues are a distraction from what should be the department's focus: public safety.

"The men in this department need to be not only responsive but respected throughout this community and we don't get that by quarreling with each other," Destino said. "We seem to have a lot of this type of accountability problem throughout the city and clearly it's something I hope to address as mayor."

The seventh candidate for mayor, Dan Ruberti, has said he will not speak to the Times.

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