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Changing chief's status the right step

Police chiefs should not be part of the state civil service system.

It was a mistake for Gloucester to put the position under civil service more than 30 years ago and it is past time to undo that mistake - something that City Councilors Jason Grow and Bruce Tobey, a former mayor, and Mayor John Bell all agree should happen.

The restrictions and protections of civil service are designed in some measure to ensure that candidates for certain positions are qualified and that they cannot be removed just because the political winds change in a community.

But the top priority should be that it serves the interests of the city and it is clear that civil service is not doing that. It is not only the current trouble between Chief John Beaudette and his subordinates that is at issue. This is a structure that will hamper the city's ability to manage those who come after him as well.

Those in top management of any department should serve at the pleasure of the city's elected leaders. But under civil service, a mayor or city council can rarely even make discipline stick against a chief who is failing to perform. Firing a chief is all but impossible.

"Short of gross negligence or criminal activity, it's almost impossible to get rid of (a chief)," said Sgt. John McCarthy, president of the Gloucester Superior Officers Association.

Indeed, McCarthy could say the same about those in his own union and the patrolmen's union as well. Grow, in fact, has called for removing the entire department from civil service - something that would be good for the city, but very difficult to do politically.

The restrictions approved by the city's voters in 1976 also include the requirement that a chief must be promoted from within. Many times that is the best thing to do - those within a department are familiar with the personnel and the city they are sworn to protect.

But simply being familiar with a community - even being an outstanding sergeant or lieutenant - doesn't always guarantee that one will be a good chief. And a mayor and city council should have the option of looking outside the department when that seems necessary.

The goal should be to get the best, and sometimes that takes going outside.

Grow deserves credit for raising the issue. Candidates for mayor should address the matter as well.

Dealing with the longtime dysfunction of the Police Department should be one of the first agenda items for whoever is the new mayor.

It is not easy to remove any position from civil service. It will take another local referendum and a vote of the Legislature as well, even if it only involves the chief.

But it is worth the effort. Those who would be mayor must tell the voters they are committed to it.