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North Port Police Department restructuring

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Published: Sunday, September 20, 2015 at 1:00 a.m.

Following advice laid out by the Center for Public Safety Management, the North Port Police Department is preparing to restructure next month.

The move will create and eliminate sworn officer positions. The department's four lieutenant positions will be defunded and replaced with a new position titled "police commanders."

There are also plans to hire more rank-and-file officers, whose numbers are both down from this time last year and below what is budgeted for the new fiscal year.

North Port is in the final stage of hiring a new assistant chief of police, a position that's been vacant since June. City spokesman Josh Taylor said more than 40 people applied for the position. Its base salary is \$78,355.

North Port has budgeted for unionized police officers to receive a 3 percent raise during the next fiscal year, city finance director Pete Lear said. He said it will be their first raise since the 2011/2012 fiscal year.

Third-party assessment

In May 2014, Police Chief Kevin Vespia recommended hiring the Center for Public Safety Management to conduct a third-party assessment of his police department.

The invite followed the suspension of two officers who were criminally charged with handcuffing and sexually assaulting a woman at a party. One killed himself as deputies came to arrest him; charges against the other officer were dropped.

The Washington, D.C.-based company published its 80-page consultant's report in October. It included 18 "major recommendations" for the department to better serve its community.

Police commanders

The most critical recommendation, according to North Port, was to abandon the police department's current "district command model" for officer management and replace it with a "temporal accountability model."

Currently, two of the department's four lieutenants oversee patrol officers. Patrol squads are divided into two geographical districts separated by Sumter Boulevard.

But beginning Oct. 1, the lieutenants are planned to be replaced by newly hired police commanders. The police commanders will be tasked with supervisory duties in a time-based system.

Police commanders will work 12-hour shifts. Four will oversee patrol squads, one will oversee the special operations division and one will oversee the department's investigations division.

"The temporal model improves oversight and increases command presence as compared to the current district model," Chief Vespia said. "The district model

required lieutenants to work predominantly daytime and weekday hours, leaving a command level presence physically absent during the nighttime and weekends.”

Police commanders will effectively act as police chief during their shifts, Vespia said. They'll have the authority to address deployment and tactical issues. They'll also ensure management of personnel.

In total, the city has budgeted for six police commander positions. Four will be hired on Oct. 1, another will be hired by January and the last by April, with a preference for patrol commander positions to be filled first.

A civilian commander will oversee the department's telecommunications and records divisions.

“Nothing is official until commission approves the budget,” Vespia said. “However, we are working to be prepared for who will fill the positions.”

At least 45 people have applied for the police commander positions.

Among them are three of the department's current lieutenants: Edward Fitzpatrick, Gary Arsenault and Scott Smith.

Records show former Lt. Stephen Lorenz applied for a commander position, but then withdrew his application when he submitted his notice of retirement on Sept. 3. He had been with the department for about 20 years and oversaw the department's training, field training and reserve unit.

Lt. Fitzpatrick, with the department since 1993, has opted into the deferred retirement option program. He will be in the program from one to three years, and be able to draw his pension while still continuing to work.

At his actual date of retirement he will receive a lump sum payout.

Records show two other North Port Police Department employees, Det. Sgt. Jason Richter and Officer Joseph Fussell, have applied for a police commander position.

Vespia said his department strives to select police commanders that “will best serve our employees and who display the ability to mentor, lead and develop the future leaders of the department.”

“I consider the process to be fair, objective and meritorious,” he said. “And (it) takes into consideration the abilities, performance and willingness of the applicants to put forth the required efforts to develop their respective employees and hold them accountable, always ensuring we are practicing law enforcement best practices.”

Rank and file

The proposed budget for next year calls for 103 sworn officer positions, two more than the last fiscal year.

Police records show that as of August 27, 92 sworn police officers were serving with the North Port Police Department. That figure included Lt. Lorenz who has since announced his retirement.

On Sept. 9, 2014, records show the police department employed 99 sworn police officers.

Vespia said that his department is hiring more officers, but it has also maintained its minimum staffing requirements for road patrol officers.

As of two weeks ago, the police department had six open sworn officer positions:

Four patrol officers, one school resource officer and one criminal investigations officer.

But there are two new patrol officer hires currently participating in field training, Vespia said.

The police department is conducting background checks on four more applicants, which typically takes at least a month to complete, he said.

Those applicants have already finished a written exam, physical abilities test and oral interview. They must still complete a lie-detector test and interview with Vespia before being hired.

In April the police department will begin searching to fill three more sworn officer positions.

The department also plans to replace one of its current police officer positions with a training sergeant, who will oversee the department's training program.

In another development, the police department and Southwest Florida Police Benevolent Association union have reached a tentative agreement that unionized officers will receive their first raises since the 2011/2012 fiscal year.

The city's finance director reports that a union agreement draft has unionized officers receiving a 3 percent raise in October 2015, 2016 and 2017.

If the agreement is approved, the unionized officers will receive a retroactive raise of 3 percent for the last fiscal year. The officers would receive a lump-sum payment for those raises.

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