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FIRE DEPARTMENT **New rules broaden field for chief's job** **Applicants**

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Mike McDonnell has moved up the Omaha **Fire** Department ranks three times in the past 15 months. Now, he oversees the department as the acting **fire chief**. **McDonnell**, the former **fire** union president, also is in the running to become Omaha's permanent **fire chief**.

That's possible only because of recent changes that lowered education and experience requirements for top **Fire** Department jobs.

New requirements for **fire chief** also opened the door for other Omaha firefighters to apply for the **chief's** position. But an Omaha city councilman is questioning whether the changes were intended to position **McDonnell** for the top job.

As union president, **McDonnell** was a close political ally of Mayor **Mike** Fahey's. During **McDonnell's** tenure, the union switched its political support from former Mayor Hal Daub to Fahey and helped him win office in 2001.

Officials in Fahey's Cabinet said that the changes in the education and experience requirements for the **chief's** job weren't done to clear the path for **McDonnell**. Rather, they said, the changes were made to ensure that Omaha firefighters would have a shot at becoming **chief**.

"I think it's a stretch to try to claim that this helps just one person," said Fahey's **chief** of staff, Paul Landow.

McDonnell, 42, said that he hasn't received special treatment because of his history with Fahey and the **fire** union. Rather, he said, his success is a product of top scores on promotional tests and management experience both in the department and the union.

"I feel that over the past three and a half months, I've done a good job," he said, referring to his time as acting **chief**.

Human Resources Director Tom Marfisi said no one internally would have qualified for the **chief's** job without the **new** requirements.

A wave of retirements in 2007 meant that many of the department's most experienced firefighters left. Many of the 75 retiring firefighters left to take advantage of generous pensions benefits that expired at the end of the year. As union president, **McDonnell** negotiated the contracts that yielded those lucrative pensions.

City Council President Dan Welch is questioning why Fahey's administrators chose to lower the requirements for **chief** rather than conduct a national search for candidates who would fit the bill.

"I don't think we should lower the requirements for the top job in the **Fire Department**," said Welch, who has been a frequent critic of **Fire Department** spending. "It's too important."

When former **Fire Chief** Robert Dahlquist announced his retirement in December, Fahey said he would fill the position internally. Seven Omaha firefighters, including **McDonnell**, are being considered.

Landow said Omaha firefighters have a better understanding of the department than outside candidates. It's also better for firefighter morale to give current employees the opportunity to be **chief**, he said.

"We are completely comfortable with the group of people who have applied," Landow said.

Fahey conducted a national search for a **new chief** in 2003. The search yielded eight outside candidates and three internal ones. Dahlquist, a longtime Omaha firefighter, was chosen.

Higher education is at the heart of the recent changes in the qualifications for **fire chief**.

From 1999 to 2006, a bachelor's degree was required and a master's degree was preferred for **fire chief** candidates. In 2006, a master's degree became a requirement.

In January, however, the city reversed course. A **new** set of rules was adopted that drops the master's degree requirement and allows some firefighters without any college to apply.

Under the **new** rules, generally the more leadership experience a candidate has, the less college the firefighter is required to have.

That set of qualifications will apply only to the current **chief** search. As of 2009, the education qualifications will be upped again, requiring at least an associate's degree. By 2011, **chief** candidates must have a bachelor's degree.

Marfisi said the changes to the **chief** qualifications were supposed to be made in March 2007, when similar modifications were made for the assistant **chief** position. However, a paperwork error meant the **new** requirements didn't get approved by the Personnel Board until January, after the search for a **new chief** was already under way.

Dahlquist suggested the changes in early 2007 because he foresaw that coming retirements would drain the department of its most experienced firefighters, Marfisi said. **McDonnell** said he was not involved in that process.

Marfisi said that none of the current **chief** candidates would have been eligible under the old qualifications because it required a master's degree and 12 years of "multi-company command-level experience." He said that meant the candidate must have 12 years at the rank of battalion **chief** or above.

That interpretation is different from what was applied when Dahlquist was named **chief** in 2003, however. At the time of his promotion, Dahlquist had been a battalion **chief** for only four years but had served as captain for eight years before that.

If the old requirement were applied the same way as when Dahlquist was named **chief**, one of the current candidates: Battalion **Chief** Anthony Lang: would qualify. Lang has a master's degree and 14 years at the rank of captain and above.

The rest of the seven **chief** candidates also have some college. Three have associate degrees in **fire** protection technology; three, including **McDonnell**, have bachelor's degrees.

By contrast, candidates for police **chief** are required to have only a bachelor's degree. That policy has been in place for more than a decade. Entry-level police and firefighters aren't required to have any college.

But the **new** qualifications for **fire chief** aren't the only recent changes that benefited **McDonnell**, who was promoted from captain to battalion **chief** in January 2007. Two months after that promotion, the requirements for assistant **fire chief** were changed.

Candidates for assistant **chief** had been required to spend at least a year as battalion **chief**. But that requirement was dropped, enabling **McDonnell** to be promoted to assistant **chief** in October: less than a year after becoming battalion **chief**.

"It makes you wonder if all these changes were made to accommodate **Mike McDonnell**," Councilman Welch said.

That's a concern, he said, because **McDonnell** hasn't held management positions in the department for very long.

Landow said he trusts the city's process to determine which of the candidates would make the best **chief**.

Marfisi said a **new chief** probably will be selected in late April.

Applicants

Seven members of the Omaha **Fire** Department have applied to be the next **fire chief**:

Acting **Chief Mike McDonnell**

Battalion **Chief** Steven Ausdemore

Battalion **Chief** Mark Ervin

Battalion **Chief** Joseph Fuxa

Assistant **Chief** Joseph Gibilisco

Assistant **Chief** Perry Guido

Battalion **Chief** Anthony Lang

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