



Savannah-Chatham police chief Willie Lovett retires

By Eric Curl and Jan Skutch

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After ascending to the top job in April 2010, Savannah-Chatham Police Chief Willie Lovett's 40-year career in law enforcement came to a sudden end Friday.

[Click here to view Lovett's retirement letter, as well as the city and county's acceptance of the retirement.](#)

Savannah City Manager Stephanie Cutter and Chatham County Manager Russ Abolt announced Lovett's immediate retirement during a late afternoon press conference at City Hall, one day after news of his pending departure began to spread within the community.

Little information was provided during the conference, and Cutter and Abolt both refused to answer questions following the announcement of the retirement and a transition team.

Cutter said she will consult with the Police Policy Commission - composed of herself, Abolt, Mayor Edna Jackson and County Commission Chairman Al Scott - to create a selection process to find a new police chief. While the position serves both the city and county, the chief of police officially is an employee of the city of Savannah.

Abolt did say the work of Lovett has been measurable.

"I appreciate the consequence and significance of his contribution to the community," he said.

The 63-year-old Lovett, who did not attend the news conference, said in his resignation letter dated Sept. 27 that he wanted to dedicate his attention to his family, including his children and grandchildren.

"I had previously decided to retire within the next 60 days, but had decided to do so immediately," he said.

Lovett could not be reached for comment. A national recruitment campaign to find a new chief is expected to take up to 12 months.

New leadership

During the interim, a three-person transition team has been established to lead the department.

Maj. Juliette Tolbert, a 32-year veteran with the department who previously served as commander of special operations, will serve as acting chief of police. Terry Enoch, who most recently served as director of the Savannah Impact Program with the department, will serve as acting assistant chief. Capt. Mike Wilkins will serve as acting major over special operations. Wilkins previously served as commander of the Downtown precinct and has 23 years experience with the department.

Lovett's retirement comes on the heels of some recent allegations against him and questions about the credibility of some officers.

Two police captains recently alleged that Lovett denied them promotion to the rank of major because they are not white. The allegations by Charles E. Hall and Dean Fagerstrom are contained in separate suits filed in U.S. District Court and follow the April 2012 promotions of white officers Larry Branson and Richard Zapal to the rank of major.

An officer has also accused Lovett of sexual harassment, according to a memo Cutter sent to the mayor and city council on Sept. 20. Cutter said the city has received a complaint about Lovett and will be investigating the matter, in a memo regarding his retirement.

"The City and County will have no comment on this ongoing investigation until such time as it is complete," she said.

It also recently came to light that federal and state prosecutors, including Chatham County District Attorney Meg Heap, are refusing to prosecute any cases involving two active Savannah-Chatham police officers apparently in response to credibility concerns.

Reactions mixed

Law enforcement officials as well as city and county leaders' reaction to the news Friday was mostly a mixture of surprise and support for Lovett.

"It is a sad situation," Heap said. "I have confidence in the local law enforcement community. I will work with everyone involved to maintain the integrity of the judicial system."

At the Chatham County Sheriff's Office, Chief Deputy Roy Harris expressed similar

sentiments.

“However, we in the law enforcement community will move past this and continue to work for the safety and protection of our citizens,” Harris said.

While Mayor Jackson and Chairman Scott could not be reached for comment, others on the city council and county commission stated their satisfaction with the job Lovett did.

“From the time he served as interim chief to his becoming chief and in his retirement, I support Chief Lovett,” said Alderman Estella Shabazz. “In my opinion, he did an excellent job.”

Similar thoughts were shared by Shabazz’s husband, County Commissioner Yusuf Shabazz.

“I think he is one of the greatest chiefs we ever had,” said Yusuf Shabazz.

Alderman Tony Thomas said he believes there is more to Lovett’s retirement that will eventually come out.

“There are a lot of loose ends that haven’t been tied up,” Thomas said, adding that he is concerned local taxpayers will end up footing the bill for Lovett’s legal defense.

Alderman Van Johnson said Lovett was a man who dedicated a majority of his life to the city and deserved a fair shake.

“I trust he’ll be afforded the same due process we afford anybody,” Johnson said.

County Commissioner Dean Kicklighter said he hopes the county has a say in the hiring of the next chief so that non-city of Savannah residents get true representation in the process. While it is a merged police department, the city clearly has the power when it comes to hiring and firing, Kicklighter said.

“The bottom line is, it’s their decision,” he said.



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