

Grand Rapids names retired Illinois fire chief John Lehman as its new fire chief



Tuesday, May 31, 2016

City Manager Greg Sundstrom has appointed John Shea Lehman to serve as the City of Grand Rapids' next fire chief. The selection comes after a five-month public recruitment process. City leaders held four community meetings and several stages of one-on-one interviews with the top candidates.

Sundstrom believes Lehman's leadership talents, skills and abilities align with the profile characteristics drafted by the community. Input from the mayor and city commission, fire department employees, management and other employee groups also helped shape the selection. The Fire Chief Selection Committee, comprised of members Sundstrom, Human Resources Director Mari Beth Jelks, Deputy City Manager Eric DeLong, Chief Financial Officer Scott Buhner, Assistant to the City Manager Tom Almonte, Economic Development Director Kara Wood, Water System Manager Joellen Thompson, Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Jorge Gonzalez and SMG DeVos Place General Manager Eddie Tadlock, unanimously supported Lehman's selection.

"I am thrilled to welcome Chief Lehman to the City of Grand Rapids," Sundstrom said. "This national recruitment and selection process was very competitive and resulted in five exceptional finalists. I thank everyone who participated in the demanding process. I am confident that we have selected a new leader that will continue to build upon the department's transformation. He will maintain and enhance our national fire accreditation and foster innovative measures to keep our department one of the best in the United States."

Chief Lehman, with 32 years of experience in the fire service, just recently retired as the City of Aurora, Ill. fire chief – a position he held since 2013. Like Grand Rapids, Aurora is the second largest city in the state, and has a similar diverse population totaling 200,000.

In his recruitment questionnaire, Lehman said he has a strong reputation for fairness and diplomacy in his leadership. He also expressed a strong vision for the Grand Rapids Fire Department.

"One of the main goals for any government is to provide for the safety of their citizens," he wrote. "My vision for the Grand Rapids Fire Department is to ensure that we have a highly motivated and cohesive workforce focused on superior training and prevention in order to handle the demands of a metropolitan Fire Agency charged with protecting 200,000 people. I will strive to maintain the fittest level of equipment and utilize the latest in technology in order to provide the high quality level of protection that the citizens of Grand Rapids deserve."

Lehman plans to enhance the Grand Rapids Fire Department's community education efforts; including fire safety for older adults and their caregivers, provide bilingual fire education, focus on college fire safety and stress the importance of carbon monoxide safety. He also plans to boost transparency and continue the city's goal of diversifying the ranks of the department, especially centering on African-American, Hispanic and female fire officers.

Deputy Fire Chief Margaret Felix served as the City's interim fire chief since early January following the retirement of Chief Laura Knapp.