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City looks at restarting firefighter hiring list

By Elaine Della-Mattia, Sault Star
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Administration has been working quietly behind the scenes at city hall examining the options to restart an active firefighter reserve list for qualified candidates.

But a resolution moved by Ward 1 Coun. Paul Christian and Ward 5 candidate Marchy Bruni has resulted in that idea being revealed to council a little earlier than anticipated.

Christian argues that it may be prudent for the city to reestablish a reserve list of qualified firefighter candidates to fill anticipated openings more of the senior staff reach retirement.

He's also hoping to use the tool as a draw to keep young people in Sault Ste. Marie and result in timely hirings when needed.

Christian said he sees nothing wrong with trying to hire the best local people, especially in fire services and didn't agree with the abolishment of the former list.

"I would prefer to pull from local talent, not that the entire list would be local," he told council.

Christian wants to reestablish a list of qualified candidates and ensure that the list is managed well and not based on nepotism.

CAO Al Horsman said internally, city staff have already been looking at reestablishing a hiring list.

"I wouldn't say it is a local list, but a list that is set up and be fair and equitable and transparent for all candidates," Horsman said.

He said while a new program has been looked at, staff is waiting for a new chief to come on board and provide input and direction on how proceed.

"It is accurate that we are going to have vacancies going to come up and its something we were looking at because you can't replace firefighters over night," he said.

An old reserve list that was started in 2011 was scratched under former fire Chief Mike Figliola's leadership in the summer of 2015.

Figliola said the age of the list and a shift in provincial standardization made it null and void.

The move affected about 11 applicants who had passed testing and were waiting for jobs to open up at the Sault Ste. Marie Fire Services.

Interim fire chief Paul Milosevich said the model used in the past would be reinstated with some 'tweaks' to ensure it stays current and up to provincial standards.

In the past, aptitude tests, physical testing and demand analysis, among other things, were completed on potential candidates and those who scored successfully would be added to the list. That list would be utilized when openings within the department arose.

A provincial wide standardized testing facility will be used to test candidates. If those candidates receive a base line certificate, they can be added to the test. Similar internal testing will be completed.

During a recruitment process, an ad would be run seeking candidates and those with the base line certificate can apply.

"The model would be the same in terms of local flavour," Milosevich said. "It's a question as to how many locals will have the certificate because the testing is done in southern Ontario."

Names on the former list will not be added to the list but are welcome to complete the testing and get on the qualified list, he said.

Job waiting lists like those typically last about two years, he said. It's not unusual for some candidates to re-qualify and be on the list several times before hirings take place.

Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker said he believes the motion is premature and that nothing should be done until a new fire chief is hired and he decides how to proceed.

"I feel like we will be handicapping a new chief," Shoemaker said. My view is we should let the next chief decide whether he wants to go with a list or with the current system. We shouldn't be developing a list system if that's not the way the next chief wants to go."

"It's for those reasons that I won't support it," he said of the resolution, fearing that if the new chief doesn't want to go with this system, it automatically puts him in an awkward position.

Christian countered that the new chief will have bigger issues to deal with than a recruitment list.

Horsman said all models are being examined so that when a new chief comes on board, all the information will be available for him to examine and determine the best course of action.

Ward 6 Coun. Joe Krmpotich sided with Christian and said that succession planning is important and to ensure that the community has the skilled staff it needs, the list makes sense. He also believes that it can be used to help retain young people in the community.

Mayor Christian Provenzano said he didn't want to see this type of motion coming from council because it's more administrative in nature and that should be left with management of the department.

But, he said, the issue had already been raised between Milosevich and Horsman and had already been launched internally.

"I would share Coun. Shoemaker's position that we are treading into the administration side, not the governance side," Provenzano said.

Christian said the motion isn't precedent setting, nor is it the first time council has dealt with administrative issues.

"I would say that the elephant in the room is that we've had ongoing issues in the department and the new fire chief has bigger issues to deal with than a recruitment list," he said.

He's hoping that as civic leaders, those hired are considered from a locally crafted process or list, getting local youth "a little closer" to the job.

Council passed the resolution in a 9-3 recorded vote asking city staff to report on the feasibility of reestablishing a qualified reserve list to meet the anticipated needs and to identify measures that will ensure that any potential list and its implementation will be fair and equitable all potential candidates.

Councillors in favor of the resolution were Christian, Steve Butland (Ward 1), Susan Myers and Sandra Hollingsworth (Ward 2,) Judy Hupponen (Ward 3), Rick Niro (Ward 4), Frank Fata and Marchy Bruni (Ward 5) and Krmpotich (Ward 6).

Those against the resolution were Provenzano, Shoemaker and Ward 4 Coun. Lou Turco.

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