Hudson lieutenant to lead Menomonie police force

By Pamela Powers
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MENOMONIE — After 2½ years without a permanent police chief, a Hudson lieutenant is heading east to be Menomonie's top cop.

The Menomonie Police and Fire Commission on Wednesday announced Eric Atkinson as the new chief. He will replace interim Chief Chris Langlois in mid-September, according to city Administrator Lowell Prange.

Atkinson was one of three finalists for the position. The other two were Ron Lueneburg, a Rhinelander police captain, and Lisa Josvai, a Monroe County sheriff’s chief deputy.

Atkinson could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Ron Sandfort, chairman on the Menomonie Police and Fire Commission, said the candidates were interviewed by a panel of their peers, including UW-Stout police Chief Lisa Walter and a Menomonie police panel comprising a lieutenant, a sergeant, an investigator and a patrol officer. Candidates also were interviewed twice by commission members.

"I think all three were solid," Sandfort said. "We like Eric. He's got the qualifications and the master's degree. He also is a good fit for the community."

Sandfort praised Atkinson's skills as a supervisor.

"We know his experience in Hudson has been excellent," he said. "He served as interim chief for a time at Hudson too. He has a pleasant way about him. He knows his business. I know he has the support of those at the Police Department who interviewed him."

Atkinson also teaches a class at UW-River Falls.

A salary has been negotiated but still must be approved by the City Council, which meets Aug. 6, before terms can be released, Prange said.

Atkinson has been a police officer for about 13 years, the past 11 in Hudson, according to a media interview in January with the news website Hudson Patch. He was promoted to lieutenant in January.
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While at Hudson, Atkinson was involved in all aspects of police work, including traffic enforcement, drug investigations and community policing.

He was born in Milwaukee, but his family moved to Roberts when he was 1. When he was 7 they moved to Hudson, and he graduated from Hudson High School, according to the January interview. He attended UW-River Falls and lived in River Falls for seven years before moving back to Hudson in 2002. He has a master's degree in police leadership from the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul.

Leadership turmoil

It has been about 2½ years since Menomonie has had a permanent police chief.

Late last year the commission announced Steve Hebbe, a deputy police chief in Anchorage, Alaska, as the new leader of the Police Department. He turned down the position a short time later. Hebbe was scheduled to start March 1.

The Police and Fire Commission resumed the search, and about 27 applications were received.

Chief Wayne Stolpa left his job in January 2010 after the Police and Fire Commission heard four citizen complaints alleging misconduct in office. Stolpa, the commission and the City Council reached an agreement in which the city paid Stolpa $79,927 to leave the job.

The commission, as part of a deal allowing him to resign, agreed to pay Stolpa as a consultant for a year.

Langlois took over as interim chief and agreed to delay his retirement as long as needed.

Sandfort said he is looking forward to having a permanent police chief in place.

"Chris has done a great job for us," Sandfort said. "He filled a need we had. Now we need to move on."

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