

Wilmington Police Dept. (WMS) 11/24/94

Wadman resigns as chief of police

Will receive \$26,000 consulting deal

By BETTIE FENNEL
and MARK ROBINSON

Staff Writers

Robert Wadman's stormy tenure as Wilmington police chief ended Monday when City Manager Mary Gornito forced him to resign.

Neither would say why.

But Chief Wadman's three years in Wilmington tell a story of a man with popular ideas about how to police a city but one who couldn't lead a unified department.

Most city councilmen lined up Monday behind the decision to get rid of the chief but offer him a consulting deal worth almost \$26,000.

City Councilman Hamilton Hicks, like the five other City Council members reached Monday, said he stands behind Ms. Gornito's action, which followed a lengthy review of morale problems in the Police Department.

"There's obviously been some leadership problems in the Police Department," Mr. Hicks said. "It's a paramilitary organization, and it needs some strong, consistent leadership that's apparently been missing. Her very deliberate review obviously confirmed that."

Councilman J.D. Causey, who criticized Ms. Gornito recently for taking so long to conduct her review of the department, praised her Monday for her thoroughness. He said her methodical review probably led to Chief Wadman's forced resignation.

After meeting with Chief Wadman and his lawyer Friday and again Monday, Ms. Gornito said the chief resigned, but she would not



Robert Wadman

say what prompted the resignation.

Chief Wadman said he resigned reluctantly at Ms. Gornito's urging. He wouldn't say what reasons she gave for her request.

He said he was proud of the work he's done in Wilmington.

"I think the world of the community. It's a great place to live, and there are wonderful people here," he said. "It's just a shame that it didn't work out."

In a terse one-sentence resignation letter, the chief said his departure will be effective Aug. 12.

He will, however, be given a consultant's contract for one month, through Sept. 12, and be paid \$4,999, the maximum the city manager is authorized to spend without the council's approval.

Ms. Gornito said she will ask the council July 19 to extend the con-

tract for an additional four months at \$5,241 a month. The consultant's fee is equivalent to five months of Chief Wadman's annual salary, she said. He makes \$62,319 a year.

Asked why the city would pay the chief as a consultant after he resigned, Ms. Gornito said she thinks it is in the city's best interest.

Ms. Gornito said the chief is on sick leave and under a doctor's care, and she is not sure if he will return to work before Aug. 12.

The chief said his medical problems — injuries from a June 25 auto accident in Kansas City, Mo. — have nothing to do with his resignation.

Maj. Ricky Simpson, who will be acting chief, met with supervisors at the department Monday afternoon to inform them of the chief's resignation, which did not come as a surprise. He said the officers had been expecting something to happen for some time, especially after Friday, when the chief and his lawyer met with the city manager and city attorney.

Though the chief is leaving, the community policing program he started in Wilmington will continue, city officials said. Maj. Simpson said the officers and the community like community policing, which he called the way of the future.

Every City Council member reached Monday said community policing should continue in Wilmington. Mayor Don Betz said the city will look for a new chief with experience in the approach, which encourages a partnership between

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police and citizens in attacking the roots of crime.

"His tenure was a success," said Mr. Betz, who has been one of the chief's most consistent supporters. "His direction, his foresight, bringing in the neighborhood base stations, community policing — started to show results in a matter of a few months. The crime statistics bear that out."

The program was popular with the community — especially in some of the poor black neighborhoods that saw its direct results. Chief Wadman placed mobile police stations in those neighborhoods in an effort to build rapport between officers and the community. The increased police presence also served as a deterrent to crime.

Much of the chief's support in the community came from those he had energized to fight crime neighborhood by neighborhood.

They said Friday that they were sorry to see him go.

"I didn't know him personally that well, but he had some good programs," said John Bastin, who volunteers six hours a week at a neighborhood base station on Princess Place Drive. He's also a volunteer with the Handicapped Parking Task Force, which is empowered to give tickets to cars parked in handicapped parking spaces.

"He was trying to work in the community a lot, which I thought was a good idea," Mr. Bastin said.

Arnold Bryant helped organize a community watch program in his neighborhood, Dry Pond, under the chief's watch.

He too thinks the chief's programs worked in city neighborhoods.

"He really enlightened people as far as getting them to understand that they need to get involved in taking so long to conduct her review of the department, praised her Monday for her thoroughness. He said her methodical review probably led to Chief Wadman's forced resignation.

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cleaning up their own neighborhoods," Mr. Bryant said. "I can't remember anyone getting involved in the community that way. My hat's off to him for that."

The chief's support was especially strong in the city's black neighborhoods, which had a more antagonistic relationship with the Police Department before Chief Wadman's arrival.

The Rev. Keith Wiley, president of the local chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, served on the citizen committee that interviewed candidates for the police chief job three years ago.

"He did build a coalition between the black community and the police and that was very helpful," Rev. Wiley said. "I think the community policing program that he initiated reduced crime in some black neighborhoods, because he got the community involved."

He acknowledged, though, that internal problems had hurt the chief's standing in the Police Department.

"It may be in the best interest of him and his family that he resign," Rev. Wiley said.

Chief Wadman was criticized throughout his tenure for his handling of disciplinary matters. In April 1993, then-Acting City Manager Howard Wood suspended the chief for letting his personal feelings interfere in an investigation into officers' conduct.

His critics seized on these problems and some began calling for his resignation. Last year, the City Council even explored the possibility of merging the police and sheriff's departments — a move that would have eliminated the chief's job.

A year later, the chief has few outspoken backers on the council. Mayor Betz and Councilman Laura Padgett were the only members of six contacted Monday who said they were disappointed that he resigned.

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The resignation was received as a victory by the local Police Benevolent Association, whose members had numerous run-ins with the chief.

"It's a decision we feel is going to benefit everybody, including Chief Wadman," said Mike McGuinness, the PBA's attorney. "We think the problems in the department will be reduced so that cops can be cops again — rather than protecting themselves from management."

Mr. Betz and City Councilman Katherine Moore are the only remaining members of the council that unanimously voted to hire Chief Wadman in August 1991.

Ms. Moore did not respond to telephone messages Monday.

Other councilmen were satisfied with Ms. Gornto's decision.

"I think what has transpired today is going to be the best for everybody concerned," Councilman Charlie Rivenbark said. "Apparently so does Chief Wadman."

Plans have not been made to replace Chief Wadman, but Mr. Causey said Monday that the council should look for a new chief from within the department.

"There is no tremendous urgency with someone as capable as Maj. Simpson" in charge, Mr. Causey said. Maj. Simpson "is certainly someone who, unquestionably, should be considered," he said. Maj. Simpson served as acting police chief before Chief Wadman was hired.

Hiring a new police chief will be up to the City Council, Ms. Gornto said, adding that there are no plans to begin the process.

Ms. Gornto, Mr. Causey and other city officials said they have not renewed talks about last year's proposal to merge the police and sheriff's departments. "I think we have the potential to have an effective Police Department," Mr. Causey said.

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activity, implementing small police bureaus in troubled neighborhoods in Aurora.

The city should consider itself fortunate, council member Katherine Moore said. She was impressed by Chief Wadman's genuine nature.

Some Wilmington police officers were reluctant to talk about the new chief. Others had met him only in passing.

"He was very articulate," said Officer Bill Rodenberg. "He seemed like he'd listen to you. He seemed very friendly — very outgoing."

Detective Pat Pridgen apparently was pleased the search for a chief is over.

Chief Wadman "meets all the qualifications. We need a new chief. It's time to get moving," he said.

Officer Matt Hinson said, "He seems to be well-versed in ideas related to community improvement — ideas that enforcement alone are inadequate."

The interview process began with Mr. Betz asking questions about the candidates' philosophies on policing, boosting morale and how they would improve the department's relationship with the minority community. Then each council member was allowed to ask his or her own questions. The interviews lasted 90 minutes.

Dressed in a charcoal gray suit and red paisley tie, Chief Wadman appeared a little nervous during his morning interview. His wife, Beverly, sat in the back of the room.

Soft-spoken but confident, Chief Wadman told the council that he would be committed to the community. Wilmington would serve as the

"wrap-up" of his career, he said.

"My goal is to get the police department in the community. We need some black leadership in the department in the upper ranks," he said.

The community must have confidence that the department is open and responsive.

After learning of his appointment late Tuesday afternoon, he was beaming and ready to go to work.

"I want to meet people in the department and the community," Chief Wadman said. "There is a lot of work to be done."

Chief Wadman was expected to perform his first unofficial act as chief Tuesday night. He was scheduled to attend a National Night Out rally with the City Council, residents and community leaders at Ebenezer Baptist Church. The activity, part of a nationwide demonstration against crime and illegal drugs, included a march to the Creekwood community.

Chief Wadman, a native of San Diego, has been chief of the Aurora department since 1989.

He is a 1970 graduate of Brigham Young University, having received a bachelor of science degree in law enforcement. He used a scholarship from the U.S. Department of Justice to pay for graduate school and received a master's degree in public administration in 1975.

Prior to working in Aurora, Chief Wadman served as chief of the Omaha, Neb., department from 1982-89. He also worked as deputy commander of public safety for the state of Utah from 1978-82.

He also has worked as chief of the Orem, Utah, department, and served as project director in the West Covina, Calif., department.

Staff writer Ross Chandler contributed to this report.