

Alton Police Chief Simmons discusses last night's controversial appointments

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - Wednesday night, Alton Police Chief Jason "Jake" Simmons was appointed to another term in office, following a very tight 4-3 vote of the Alton City Council.

Simmons's reappointment was not the only controversial appointment at last evening's city council meeting. For the first time since 2009, the Alton Police Department will have a deputy chief. Former Sergeant Terry Buhs will receive a \$15,000 pay raise to his current salary of nearly \$80,000 to become the deputy chief of the Alton Police Department. Simmons said this rank-jumping and pay raise are not unusual, adding the city will save more money having Buhs on salary as the deputy chief.

"I am a little overwhelmed," Simmons said of the need for a deputy chief, which was not formerly filled due to financial worries of the city, "We have a lot of community projects going on right now. The deputy chief is something we always used to have. It allows me a confidential sounding board to discuss strategy and coordinate efforts. It also allows us to have contract talks, and we can assign the deputy chief to other duties to save on overtime."

As an example of that, Simmons said Buhs was on prisoner transport duty late Thursday morning, which prevents the department from having to call an officer to take prisoners from Alton to East St. Louis.

When asked why Buhs was selected over other candidates in the department with higher rankings, Simmons said the department needed someone who was "loyal to the chief, the mayor, the department and the city." He said Buhs - a 27-year veteran of the Alton Police Department - had the respect of the department as well as many people in the city. Simmons said Buhs was also dedicated to the current mission of the Alton Police Department, which has changed drastically in recent years to attempt to reflect a commitment to community policing.

"This is something I and the mayor both want," Simmons said. "It will help improve community relations now."

Buhs is as committed to the community policing model brought to the city by a coalition of the Community Relations Committee and former St. Louis Police Chief Daniel Isom and the University of Missouri St. Louis (UMSL), Simmons said. He said Buhs would not only continue to embody the department's commitment to community policing, but would also allow Simmons to commit more of his time as well.

"We have officers getting out of their cars now, and visiting with people, like kids at bus stops," Simmons said. "They are also able to go into schools and visit with students to educate them about what we do. We have also made contact with more business owners. These are all things the community and department focus groups recommended."

Those internal department focus groups and surveys conducted through the UMSL study had harsh critiques regarding the current leadership of the Alton Police Department - including its chief administrator Simmons. Simmons said in previous interviews with Riverbender.com that critique included himself as well as other leaders within the department. He acknowledged the scores again Thursday morning and said the department was determined to make concentrated changes.

"It got a little heated last night, because of budget numbers and personality conflicts," Simmons said of last night's council meeting. "The politics are over, it is time to move forward. Those scores are what they are, and there are morale issues in every police department. We will remain dedicated to the mission, and people in the community have seen real change that has been needed over the last three years."

More on the community policing platform will be discussed later this month with Isom, Simmons and the Community Relations Committee, Simmons said, and those numbers will be further evaluated.

