

Fla. Chief Says Dept. Behavior Not Factor In Retirement

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ALTAMONTE SPRINGS, Fla. --

The Altamonte Springs police chief announced he will step down after nearly a decade on the job Thursday.

City Manager Frank Martz told WFTV that it has nothing to do with an increasing number of his officers being disciplined or even arrested for felony crimes.

Altamonte Springs Police Chief Robert Merchant has overseen a police department that has seen its share of problems. Since the chief took over in 2002, numerous officers have had run-ins with the law themselves.

In just the last year, Officer Clay Adams was arrested for conspiring to grow marijuana in his home. Officer Clay Toomes pleaded no contest to having sex with a 17-year-old girl.

Deputy Chief George Small was investigated for fixing tickets. Officer Bryan Burke was suspended for driving his unmarked police car to a bar.

Former Officer Ashley Rowe resigned after a DUI charge for crashing her vehicle while off-duty, and Lt. Matt Tegge was put on leave this week over accusations he was drunk and disorderly at a Halloween event.

The city says the chief's retirement has nothing to do with any of the officers' actions.

"Every police department has its share of issues and we're no exception. But the personal choices of some of those police officers have been very bad, but to the city's credit, and Chief Merchant's credit, the discipline has been very harsh and has been quick, and in most of those cases, they're gone," Martz said.

Martz said the chief is leaving instead, because he's been part of the Deferred Retirement Option Program (DROP) since 2008. His salary was roughly \$122,000 per year, and now, as part of DROP, he will pull down \$7,400 per month, or roughly \$90,000 per year.

"We knew this was coming, and you have the opportunity within five years to retire, and Bob has chosen the end of this fiscal year to be his retirement date," Martz said.

The chief isn't the only officer taking advantage of DROP. So far, 20 officers in the department have dropped, and another nine are slated to do so in the coming years. That's roughly 30-percent of the department.

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