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Town to make police entrance requirements more stringent

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RAISING THE BAR – Secaucus Police Chief Dennis Corcoran wants to tighten recruitment standards for new hires to the department.

This Tuesday, the Town Council will consider an ordinance to upgrade hiring requirements for the Secaucus Police Department.

In addition to previous requirements, new recruits will be expected to have at least 60 credits from an accredited college or university, and must demonstrate an ability to read, write, and speak English. The department will also reinstitute an oral exam that had been phased out several years ago. Previous applicants were only required to have a high school diploma or the equivalent.

The proposed ordinance will have a public hearing at the Town Council meeting on May 12, and will be voted on that night. The measure appears to have broad support from members of the governing body.

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“This is a step we’re taking because of the complexities of the law today,” said Mayor Dennis Elwell last week. “Obviously municipalities are open to lawsuits all the time. I think the chief’s thoughts are that we need to raise standards for our new recruits. He feels that would be helpful. I happen to agree with him, and my sense is that’s something most, if not all, of the council members agree with.”

Secaucus Police Chief Dennis Corcoran explained that effective communication skills are imperative to police work.

“The majority of what we do is communicate with people, and I see that’s lacking with some of the people who were hired over the last several years,” Corcoran said. “Their communication skills leave something to be desired.”

Test too easy

In addition to meeting new requirements, future applicants will face a new, more stringent entrance exam.

Previously, the town had used a police test that was developed by Aon Consulting, which had been recommended by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) and endorsed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

In the mid-1990s, the DOJ began investigating hiring practices within the Secaucus Police Department. The DOJ

specifically investigated whether Secaucus was doing enough to recruit non-white applicants. Separately from the DOJ investigation, the NAACP began looking into hiring practices in Secaucus, both within and outside the police department. On the heels of those investigations, Secaucus reached agreements with both the DOJ and the NAACP to do more to attract applicants from surrounding communities that have larger black and Latino populations.

According to Corcoran, of the 57 police officers currently on the Secaucus police force, two are African American, one is Asian, eight are Latinos, one is Arab American, and three are women. (In the late 1980s, Secaucus had been under a consent decree to hire more women.)

As part of its agreement with the NAACP, Corcoran, who was not police chief during the DOJ and NAACP investigations, said the Secaucus Police Department had agreed to use the Aon test. But, he added, "The quality of the test was too simple."

Secaucus is not the first town to have problems with the Aon test as a police entrance exam. After studying the impact of the test on hiring practices in Nassau County, N.Y., a 1997 study at the University of Delaware concluded that it tended to weed out many of the best qualified applicants for police work, while advancing weak candidates.

The Aon test will be replaced with one developed by McCann Associates, which the department has used in the past for both entry-level and supervisory hires.

"We were looking for something a little bit more challenging, where you're going to get higher quality candidates, especially for the salaries that we pay," Corcoran said. "If a patrolman reaches top pay they're making \$90,000 a year."

Starting salaries for new recruits are about \$40,000.

New hires possible soon

If the proposed ordinance passes this week, the new hiring requirements will be in place before the next group of police recruits begins training, possibly later this year.

In April, Corcoran had said the department would hire six new officers after September. The new hires would bring the current Secaucus Police force up to 63 officers from its current figure of 57 officers.

Some residents have criticized Corcoran recently for not doing enough to curb a string of home break-ins that have occurred around town since January. He believes adding six officers will improve the department's patrol work.

It is unclear how the town will pay for these new hires, although last month Corcoran indicated that some money might be available through various grant requests that have been submitted.

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