



Our Opinion: Adjust how city hires police, firefighters

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FOR YEARS, the city of Springfield's low number of minorities in the police and fire departments was a big issue.

Today, the city's pocketbook issues have trumped its diversity issues.

With the Great Recession and the tight city budgets that have resulted from it, there is no way to boost the number of minorities in the police and fire departments until the city can again start hiring people.

The city currently is working off a list of recruits from a fire department test given in 2006 and a police test given in 2007. Next year would be the earliest a new test could be given, said city spokesman Ernie Slottag.

That doesn't mean the city shouldn't be thinking about ways to resume its efforts aggressively when the economic clouds lift.

MAYOR TIM DAVLIN once pledged to bring the percentage of minorities up to their proportion of the city's population, which is roughly 15 percent. He made several efforts to try to boost the numbers, including appointing a University of Illinois Springfield administrator to spearhead those efforts in 2006.

"We need to get this up and running now," Davlin said when he appointed UIS administrator Christopher Miller, who has since left the city. Today, less than 1 percent of the city's firefighters are black and 4.6 percent of the city's police officers are black, which is about the same as it's been for years.

AS THE police department tries to recruit minorities, Robert Williams, who is the third black officer to serve as the city's top cop, should be a tremendous asset for the department. He has said recruiting minorities is a priority. Another potential plus is a new, accelerated community police officer certificate program offered by Lincoln Land Community College on its east-side campus.

But the next mayor and city council also should look at adjusting the way the city hires cops and firefighters.

Today, the city hires police and firefighters through a process called banding. Candidates are grouped together based on their scores on a hiring test. The scores fall within statistically derived ranges. Scores in a single band are treated as equal. The city can offer jobs to anyone within a band, but must exhaust all of the applicants in the highest-scoring band before moving to subsequent bands and repeating the process.

That was a change from an earlier city policy that required recruits to be taken off a list in the exact order of how they scored on the test and interview.

IN 2007, then-Police Chief Ralph Caldwell called for changing the system to one similar to what Sheriff Neil Williamson uses in which all recruits who qualify based on a test and an interview are eligible to be hired.

"Banding is not going to get me the numbers," Caldwell said. "We're going to sustain possibly and maybe improve slightly the numbers we already have. I want to do better. I want to diversify the police department."

He was right. Although efforts at minority recruitment by Miller yielded significant improvement in the number of minorities taking the test, too many of them were stuck in the lower bands to make a big difference in the actual number of minorities in the police department.

Davlin has said because of a 2001 consent decree requiring the city to hire more minorities and for the local NAACP to help recruit them, changing the system would require NAACP agreement. That's a conversation he should be having now to get ready for the day when the city can again afford to hire police officers and firefighters.