

# Spokane Police Chief Frank Straub forced out

## Assistant Chief Dobrow will fill post in the interim

Nicholas Deshaies/SR

Spokane police Chief Frank Straub was forced to resign Tuesday following complaints about his combative leadership tactics.

At a hastily called news conference, Mayor David Condon said concerns from police department employees, as well as interviews Condon conducted, made it clear that Straub's aggressive behavior as chief was no longer appropriate.

"It was clear that we needed to move in a direction, change management," Condon said.

Despite such a loss in confidence, Straub will remain on the city payroll through the end of 2015. He will be transferred to the city attorney's office, but Brian Coddington, the mayor's spokesman, could not say what department will be paying the final three months of Straub's salary.

Straub is currently the highest paid employee at City Hall, making nearly \$180,000.

Assistant Chief Rick Dobrow will serve as interim chief. Dobrow has been with the department since 1994. He spent several years as an officer in Stockton, Calif., before coming to Spokane. [Straub picked him to be assistant chief last year.](#)

Straub's sudden resignation follows months of rumors about his explosive behavior, as well as reports about personnel moves involving two women who were transferred out of the police department. Tuesday's news conference brought it out in the open.

Leaders representing the union of higher ranking police officers met with Condon on Sept. 8 and advised him that they would no longer tolerate "any further unprofessional behavior" by Straub, according to a memo from the union, the Lieutenants and Captains Association. The memo cited personal attacks, emotional outbursts, scare tactics, threats, retaliation, inappropriate language and untruthfulness as examples of such behavior.

"Members of this Association reported several specific examples of unprofessional and even hostile behavior directed toward themselves or other members by Chief Straub," said the memo from the union. "His behavior has created a workplace environment inconsistent with collaboration and contrary to effective leadership."

Calls seeking comment from John Gately, president of the Spokane Police Guild, and Dave McCabe, president of the Lieutenants and Captains Association, were not returned.

[Condon recruited Straub](#) in 2012 to apply for chief and nominated him for the job saying he was the best choice to reform the department. The abrupt changes Straub made drew ire up and down the police chain of command.

When Condon reached out to Straub, Straub was finishing up as the public safety director for Indianapolis, supervising that city's police and fire departments. [He already had submitted his resignation following a tumultuous tenure](#) that supporters said was the result of significant reform but some others blamed on a brash leadership style. Straub served in Indianapolis for about 2 ½ years. Before that, he led the police and fire departments in White Plains, New York.

## **Job transfers**

Earlier this year the city of Spokane [transferred Monique Cotton](#) from her job as police spokeswoman to a higher-paying communications job with the Spokane Parks and Recreation Department. Her \$90,000 salary continues to be paid from the police budget.

City Council members raised questions about the transfer, but Condon's chief of staff, City Administrator Theresa Sanders, said Cotton's skills were needed at the park department to "tell the story" of Riverfront Park, which is about to undergo a vast transformation after voters approved a parks bond last year.

[Sanders said last month that Cotton's \\$9,000 salary increase was an "enticement"](#) to persuade her to change jobs.

Coddington said Cotton's salary was part of a contractual "step" process, but still defended Sanders' description.

"She wanted to be sure for Monique's case that she was taking a career advancement and moving forward in her career and taking a job – she wanted to be sure that that was a good fit for her," Coddington said, adding that there were no other factors involved in Cotton's pay raise.

However, city officials first attempted to move Cotton to the Spokane Fire Department, an effort rebuffed by fire officials.

Assistant Fire Chief Brian Schaeffer said city administration officials approached him in April about transferring Cotton.

"The discussion of creating a public safety (public information officer) position and assigning Cotton in there was discussed," Schaeffer said in an email. "We did have a meeting and decided that we would prefer to do recruitment for someone that was better fitted for fire."

Cotton, who was hired by Straub in 2013 to lead the department's communications and marketing strategy, was not the first to be moved while still getting a check from police.

Carly Cortright was paid her annual salary of \$82,494 by the police department for 15 months after leaving her position as the police business services director in October 2013 to work as the

director of the 311 project, a customer service program under the city's Office of Neighborhood Services.

Cortright said she was pleased with the transfer because of Straub's "constant negative feedback and belittling."

"I left SPD because I was offered an opportunity to be part of a project that could make a real difference in the community," Cortright said. "I was no longer making that difference at the SPD due to the constant negative feedback and belittling I was receiving from Chief Straub."

Since Cotton's transfer was reported, the move has been raised as a campaign issue by Shar Lichty, who is challenging Condon in his bid for re-election.

Condon rejected the idea that Straub's resignation would affect his re-election, arguing that Straub was hired after a national search and with citizen input.

"Let's remember where we've come in the last four years," Condon said. "The national expertise that Frank Straub brought to our communities – the programs, the facilitation of the education and training of our senior officers – has never been at this level before. Those will continue."

### **'Excellent senior management'**

Condon on Tuesday sought to assure that the police department will not undergo major upheaval after Straub's ouster. He said he anticipated no other personnel changes in the department.

"We have an excellent senior management team in police division," Condon said. "Many of them were selected by Frank Straub, and they will continue in those positions under Rick Dobrow. Rick Dobrow was selected by Frank Straub."

In a news release Tuesday afternoon, the city lauded Straub's success, saying he "has led the effort that has driven down crime and use of force incidents while restoring public confidence in officers."

The news release said Straub resigned his position in the police department to "pursue new opportunities and be closer to family." At a news conference, Condon detailed problems with Straub's management style but would not say if he asked Straub to resign. Other officials, however, acknowledged that the resignation was forced.

Straub said in the news release, "I am very proud of the work that has been done to re-engage the Spokane Police Division with the community and drive down crime. We have achieved great things and brought policing in Spokane closer to the community. Rather than engage in a public discussion that distracts from making Spokane safer I have told the Mayor that it is time for new energy and perspective."

Council President Ben Stuckart, who joined Condon at the news conference, said the "council has really high confidence in Chief Dobrow."

“I have never dealt with anybody on the police force that has answered any question or concern I’ve had faster or more thoroughly,” Stuckart said. “He’s going to do an exemplary job in the interim role.”

Though Condon said Dobrow would be the interim chief, he gave no timeline to the process searching for a permanent chief.

“At this point, Chief Dobrow will serve in an interim capacity, but there is no immediate steps to be taken for a national search or otherwise,” Condon said. “Rick Dobrow is committed to these programs that we’ve brought to Spokane, so there is no immediate steps to do anything except to have Rick Dobrow as the chief and the senior management team to stay in place.”

Deb Conklin, chairwoman of the police ombudsman commission, said she expected a national search for Straub’s replacement.

“I will be stunned if the city doesn’t do a serious type of national search for a new police chief,” she said.

Spokane County Sheriff Ozzie Knezovich said he learned of Straub’s resignation from others in his department who saw it on Twitter.

Knezovich has had a more strained relationship with Straub than he did with Straub’s predecessor, Anne Kirkpatrick, who also was hired in an effort to reform the department.

“Frank basically ran his agency, and we didn’t have a lot of interaction,” Knezovich said. “I have always had a close relationship with all the chiefs I’ve worked with. Frank was just a little different in that approach.”

## **Management shuffles**

Part of Straub’s approach was a major reorganization of the department that led to leadership changes.

Some veterans on the police force characterized Straub as moody and quick to lose his temper.

Within a year of his hire, Straub’s leadership team consisted of Assistant Chief Craig Meidl, Cmdr. Brad Arleth of the Patrol Division, Cmdr. Joe Walker of the Tactical and Strategic Operations Bureau, Cortright as director of the Business Services Bureau, and Cotton as the department’s director of communications.

[Within months, Meidl, Arleth and Walker stepped down and opted for demotions.](#) But city officials at the time said they were not worried about Straub’s management style.

Straub picked Meidl to serve as his assistant chief in December 2012, over Scott Stephens, who had served as interim chief previous to Straub’s hire. But Meidle only stayed in the position for

about year, opting to be demoted to the rank of lieutenant. He was replaced by Dobrow, and Meidl is now a captain and leads the department's Hillyard precinct.

Meidl's self-demotion followed those of Brad Arleth and Joe Walker. Arleth stepped down as commander of field operations to a captain in the investigations department and the downtown precinct. Walker stepped down as commander of investigations and returned to a civil service position as lieutenant.

*Staff writers Rachel Alexander, Kip Hill and Jonathan Brunt contributed to this report.*