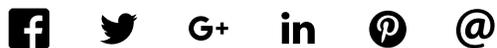


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EDITOR'S PICK

Female firefighter in Methuen files complaint, says she was passed over for promotion due to sexism, favoritism

By Breanna Edelstein bedelstein@eagletribune.com Jun 10, 2019



METHUEN — One of Methuen's three female firefighters says city officials passed her up for a promotion because of her gender and favoritism, according to a complaint filed with the Civil Service Commission by her attorney.

Tracy Blanchette, a lifelong Methuen resident and 25-year member of the Fire Department, is appealing the city's decision to promote a male colleague who scored lower on assessment testing for an open captain's position.

Blanchette argues, in the complaint filed by attorney Gary Nolan, that she was an excellent candidate for promotion — experienced and well-qualified. She said the process was flawed by gender discrimination and favoritism based on relationships within the department's management and at City Hall.

"She has an impeccable record, replete with decorations including Firefighter of the Year," the complaint reads. "(Blanchette) is college educated, was an academy instructor for several years, has no discipline and had the most seniority of any of the candidates."

According to an independent assessment center hired by the city to assist with filling the positions, Blanchette became the top-ranked candidate after the person ahead of her, now Capt. Michael Fluet, was promoted to one of two open jobs.

But Blanchette's rank dropped drastically after a panel of city officials conducted its own set of interviews, according to the complaint, and she found herself last on a short list of finalists.

"These interviews were not recorded either by video or audio," Blanchette's attorney wrote in the complaint. "The questions called for subjective answers, evaluated subjectively and widely different by the panel members."

In Methuen, the mayor has the final say in hiring and promoting city officials after receiving a recommendation from the appropriate department head, in this case, the fire chief.

On Monday morning, a spokesman for the mayor had no immediate comment on the complaint.

In the complaint, the attorney, Nolan, argues that the evaluation of the independent assessment center should have been more heavily valued.

The assessment center's work was done with blind scoring, meaning scorers did not know who took which test, the complaint reads.

"The assessment center was by no means an obscure, general knowledge exam," Nolan wrote in his complaint. "A panel of fire experts tested candidates specifically, and comprehensively, on their knowledge and scenario based on application of the Methuen Fire Department's standard operating guidelines and its rules and regulations."

Nolan argues that the city used the scoring from the subjective interviews as a reason to bypass Blanchette.

The complaint says the candidate chosen over Blanchette has a close personal relationships with the fire chief, an off-duty past professional relationship with the fire chief, and a political and family nexus with others who play a significant role in ensuring that the selected candidate was successful.

A list of witnesses that attorney Nolan plans to call on during a hearing are listed in the complaint. They are: Chief John Sheehy, Director of Human Resources Ann Randazzo, Human Resources/Workers Compensation employee Jill Stackelin, City Councilor James McCarty, Methuen DPW employee Daniel Tulley, and Matthew Tulley, who was promoted over Blanchette.

Discovery evidence in the case is ongoing, Nolan said. He plans to submit documents — provided by the assessment center and city officials on the panel — related to the promotional process.

The complaint alleges that Blanchette has sought that documentation since March 6, but "the city has not replied."

Nolan writes in the complaint that of Methuen's 100 sworn firefighters, there are no female ranking officers. A woman has never been sworn in as a captain.

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