

Commissioner resigns in wake of fire dept shakeup

(KNZA)--Hiawatha City Commissioner John Merchant, Jr. resigned Monday evening following a failed attempt to reinstate recently terminated Fire Chief Ryan Shockley.

The resignation came after Assistant Chief Paul Shaefer addressed the Commission. Shaefer said he felt the action taken by the Commission at their November 18 meeting to terminate Shockley was “a huge slap in the face.” Shockley had served as fire chief since May 2018.

Shaefer said the firefighters back Shockley 100 percent and are comfortable with his leadership abilities.

Shaefer questioned what the fire department could do to get Shockley reinstated.

Mayor Bill Collins and commissioners said they could not discuss the reasons for his termination, saying it was a personnel matter.

A motion by Merchant to reinstate Shockley as fire chief died due to the lack of a second.

Merchant then tendered his resignation as finance commissioner. Reading from a letter of resignation, Merchant said he will be relocating outside the city limits later this month. He cited concerns over the ease of access of community members to speak at commission meetings, an unanswered request to have credit card charges listed and discussed in open session, and a lack of accountability.

The Commission voted to accept Merchant's resignation, effective immediately. He had served on the Commission since January. The Commission set a special meeting for the evening of December 9 to appoint someone to fill the remainder of his term.

Commissioner Dustin Williams said he hates that emergency responders and the city are at odds and hopes to find ways to re-establish proper communication. Williams said he feels its something that needs more discussion when tensions are not so high. Commissioner Becky Shamburg agreed with Williams.

A large audience was on hand for Monday's meeting, including both concerned community members and members of the fire department.

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