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## 2 officials seek ouster of fire chief

Reforms at L.A. Fire Department are taking too long, city leaders say. But William Bamattre points to his record as a 'change agent.'

By Steve Hyman  
 Times Staff Writer

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Two prominent officials on Monday called for the ouster of Los Angeles Fire Chief William Bamattre because of repeated allegations of hazing and discrimination within the department.

City Councilman Jack Weiss, chairman of the council's public safety committee, and Controller Laura Chick said that reform wasn't happening quickly enough in the 3,900-member department. Their comments came after a council committee hearing Monday on incidents within the Fire Department.

"The fire chief came to the table" at the hearing "and stated perfunctorily that 'I take responsibility' and then told us the principal reason for these enduring problems is his inability to fire firefighters," Weiss said. "That's a cop-out."

Chick pointed to an audit she released in January that found that a majority of recruits, minorities and female firefighters in the department said they were victims of harassment or discrimination.

"I have lost faith and hope that this current leadership of the department can make the changes necessary because in the last 12 years it hasn't happened," Chick said. "The current management should be out."

Bamattre — a Los Angeles firefighter for more than 25 years and chief for the last 11 — said Monday that he intended to retire in February 2008. The chief could only be removed before then by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who since taking office in July 2005 has fired four general managers.

A statement from Villaraigosa's office late Monday did not address the prospect of a dismissal.

"While he will not comment on any specific individual, the mayor believes that the issues raised in the controller's audit are compelling and demand immediate attention," the statement read. "The mayor believes that we need to fundamentally change the culture at the Fire Department. That's why he asked his Fire Commission to toughen guidelines against employee harassment, hazing and discrimination."

Bamattre said during the hearing that the department was making progress and that it retains a good reputation among the public for its response to emergencies.

However, he also said that he realized that the department had failed to improve the working environment within the city's 103 neighborhood fire stations.

"I've heard a lot of people calling for my head," Bamattre said. "There is no other person who can come in and

implement these changes better than I."

After the hearing, Bamattre said he intended to remain on the job.

"We work close with the mayor's office, and certainly I have the best interest of the department as my objective," he said. "I know that the attention focuses on the fire chief and I understand that.

"It's always a little interesting to me when" department critics "preface the conversation with saying that operationally we're the best around," Bamattre added.

"Well, you don't excel in one area and fall flat on your face in another. I believe I have a record as a change agent, and I'd like to move forward aggressively with these changes."

Bamattre was promoted to chief in 1995 as a reformer after the department was hit with repeated allegations of discrimination in its ranks. That year, Bamattre — at the urging of politicians — issued a zero-tolerance policy for such behavior.

Council members Wendy Greuel, Jose Huizar and Bernard C. Parks also attended the hearing but declined to comment on whether Bamattre should step down or be dismissed.

Councilman Dennis Zine said that though Bamattre should be held accountable for problems within the department he should stay on the job, in part because of the lengthy search that would ensue in trying to replace him.

The Fire Department has been under increased scrutiny because of several lawsuits working their way through the courts and public allegations of bias.

The issue was highlighted after the council earlier this month approved a \$2.7-million settlement in a lawsuit brought by Tennie Pierce, a former firefighter who alleged that his colleagues in a racist stunt laced his spaghetti dinner with dog food in 2004.

Villaraigosa last week vetoed the deal when photos emerged in the media of Pierce himself engaging in firehouse pranks. The council could vote today to override Villaraigosa, although that would require 10 votes, an unlikely tally.

Some council members have also complained that City Atty. Rocky Delgadillo didn't tell them about the extent of the photos before they voted 11 to 1 for the settlement.

On Monday, The Times was anonymously provided with a transcript of a June 21 closed session in which the council discussed the pending Pierce litigation. In that transcript, Deputy City Atty. Vibiana Andrade said that Pierce was a known prankster and that there were photos.

"For example, if you knew that two weeks before [the incident] he had been pranking, and I've got pictures of him engaging in pranks with his fellow firefighters and he's part of the group, then his claim that he's an outlier and that because he's African American he was subjected to this, sort of looks a little silly," Andrade said.

No member of the council followed with a question about photos and no one from the city attorney's office again mentioned them.

During the hearing, Bamattre said that the pictures of Pierce go back to 1993, but they were never uncovered during the Fire Department's own investigation of the dog food incident. Bamattre said that underscored the need to improve the department's internal investigations.

Both he and the commission that oversees the department want more civilian oversight over the agency's disciplinary process. They also want a more standardized system of punishment and a better way to track allegations against individual firefighters.

Bamattre has also said that if that plan didn't work, he would be open to changing the City Charter to give him the right to increase punishments. That has drawn the ire of some firefighters.

Also calling for Bamattre's ouster was Pat McOsker, the outgoing president of the city firefighters union, who said he lost his job in a recent election partially because of his willingness to acknowledge there are problems within the department.

"We have discrimination and gender bias, but what we have is a Fire Department that fosters bullying from the top down — and that is a management-caused problem," McOsker said. "The bottom line is: We have a Fire Department that has allowed this for 10 years, and we've had the same leadership for 10 years."

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