

# Niki Hamby Retires as Fire Chief

Niki Hamby resigned Wednesday as the chief of the North Wilkesboro Fire Department.

Hamby, who is 58, has been a member of the department since he was 21 and the chief for the past 11 years. He became chief in January 2003, succeeding Edgar Harris.

Town Manager Larry South appointed Jimmy Martin as the interim chief.

“It’s a young man’s game, and I’m old enough to retire,” said Hamby Thursday. “I can’t crawl around with an air pack on my back like I once did.”

Hamby’s resignation was effective immediately. He also resigned as a member of the department.

He told South of the decision in a meeting at town hall.

“Larry and I mutually agreed upon everything, we’re good on everything,” Hamby said. “I’ve been talking about retirement for a couple of years anyway. I think that they (town officials) were ready to make a change, so it was a good thing for me to retire and let them do what they’re going to do.”

South said that he had “a very cordial conversation with Niki,” adding, “he (Hamby) felt like it was time for him to move on. He has not given me a written letter of resignation with any other reason.

“But it was his decision.

“We appreciate Niki’s contributions to the department and his service,” South added. “He has brought the department a long way.”

Hamby, who will continue to work full time as the fire investigator for the Wilkes County Sheriff’s Department, was the department chief on a part-time basis. He received an annual stipend of \$3,000 as fire chief.

## **Full-time chief?**

There has been discussion among town board members about hiring a full-time chief. The town employs three full-time engineers who rotate on 24-hour shifts to make certain that there is always one officer on duty to drive the “first out” truck to fires.

During the recent town board retreat, held on March 22, Commissioner Bart Hayes said, “We’ve got the best fire department in the community, but we need to take it up to the next level. We need a professional fire chief and a new station.”

Hayes said Thursday that he knew of no connection between his comments that the town needed a professional, or full-time, chief and Hamby’s resignation.

“I think it was more coincidence than anything else,” Hayes said. “I have not seen his letter of resignation, and I don’t know his reasons for resigning. I would hope that at no time did anyone take my comments out of context and think that I meant that Niki was not professional.

“By professional, I meant full time, and I would hope he would have applied for the position if we ever went to a full-time chief.”

Hayes added that Hamby “took the department to the next level by instituting a lot of training and getting the firemen where they needed to be. I think he did a great job. Niki and I have been friends for a long time, and there is no animosity between us as far as I know.”

Hayes added, “I know that some people have twisted around the comments I made at the retreat, and I’m still upset about it. But it makes no sense that I would say we had the best department and then criticize the department.”

### **Decision on new chief**

South said Thursday, “We will probably shoot to make the new chief a full-time employee. There are no plans, however, to add a fourth full-time position.

The three full-time engineers are Kini Hamby (the former chief’s brother), Tony Hayes and Robby Gentle.

“That doesn’t mean that one of those three will be the new chief, though they will be welcome to apply as will all others,” said South. “We would probably have to eliminate one of those positions if someone else was hired as chief. That’s just one thought.

“Or perhaps if we could find someone who would serve as chief for the current stipend, if it isn’t one of those three, we might go that route.”

When asked if town officials would solicit input from the firemen in selecting a new chief, South said, “Once we decide how to move forward, we would welcome input.”

Hamby was hired by then-Town Manager Hank Perkins, saying, “I applied for the position along with several others. I’d say they’ll get some input from the firemen before a decision is made.”

Martin, who is the retired wastewater plant supervisor for the town, currently works as a part-time employee (18 hours a week) at the plant.

He joined the fire department in 1982 and has served as first- and second-assistant chief, in each position for “six to eight years,” he said. He was not an officer in the department when he was named as interim chief this week.

When asked if he would be interested in the full-time position, Martin said, “I don’t know at this point. I’m semi-retired. I’ll fill in until they decide the criteria for the new chief.”

Kipi Hamby (also a brother of the former chief) and John Brown are the assistant chiefs with the department.

Hamby said he made the announcement to the department officers during a retirement dinner for fireman David Felts at the fire department Wednesday night.