

Cheektowaga police chief thought he would never move. Then Carolina called

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Cheektowaga Police Chief David J. Zack was visiting his daughter last year in North Carolina when they passed the Asheville Police Department while on a walk through town.

"'How cool would this be, to be chief here, Dad,'" she said, Zack recalled.

Five months later, it's about to be pretty cool.

Zack starts his new job in Asheville, next month, becoming the Mountain City's fifth chief in eight years, leaving behind a three-decade career, and a lifetime, in Cheektowaga.

At age 56, Zack wasn't necessarily looking for a new job. But the high turnover rate in police chiefs – including the abrupt departure of Zack's predecessor, who served less than 60 days – sparked an intensive national search by city administrators that culminated in December when three finalists were announced.

One of them was Zack, who served the Cheektowaga Police Department for 33 years.

"It went from me walking around, thinking this place was cool, to all of a sudden I'm the chief," he said this week.

Zack, a divorced father of two grown daughters, lived in Cheektowaga since his birth. He announced his retirement from the town department Monday.

"At this stage in my life, I have one more chance for one big move, one more gamble before it's too late to make one," said Zack. "I never would have dreamed this would pop up in that city, but things fell into place in a place I really dig. A big part of my decision is my daughter, to be closer to her."



David Zack took his role as a liaison between the public and the police seriously and often visited schools to meet with children. (Photo courtesy of the Town of Cheektowaga)

Asheville, the 10th most populous city in North Carolina, is sandwiched between the Blue Ridge and Great Smoky mountains in the junction of the Swannanoa and French Broad rivers. Its population of 88,000 grows to 150,000 during tourist season with its arts, historical architecture and growing craft beer industry the biggest draws.

Asheville's police department is the largest in western North Carolina. With 238 officers and 63 non-sworn professionals, it responded to 114,159 calls for service in 2018, 4.8% more than in the previous year, according to the city's website.

Asheville has been without a police chief since Chris Bailey resigned in September 2019 for personal reasons, according to Blue Ridge Public Radio. He had come from the Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department.

In recent years, the department was the focus of controversy when a police officer was charged with felony assault in the beating of an Asheville jaywalker. Bodycam footage that recorded the incident fueled public discord.

The department's image was also tarnished in 2014 after another police chief resigned after a quarter of the city's officers signed a statement of no confidence in the department. At the time, hundreds of traffic cases were dismissed amid increasing resignations by officers and administrative errors that resulted in police using expired radar guns, published reports stated.

"There's a lot of frustration there it seems, with the officers as well, because of the constant leadership changes. Any employee would be frustrated by that," Zack said.

Zack's departure from Cheektowaga's 130-officer department caps a nine-year run as chief. His tenure started with a baptism by fire, when a gang fight in May 2011 sparked a fatal shooting at Cheektowaga Town Park. Following the shooting, two Cheektowaga Central school teachers were placed on paid administrative leave after it was revealed that they had a series of conversations with the murder defendant while he was in jail awaiting trial.

"As chief, managing that case was probably one of the biggest challenges," Zack said. "The key was making the public aware of what was going on. In its aftermath, we had to restore our relationship with the school, the union and neighborhood groups."

In announcing Zack's selection as police chief, Asheville City Manager Debra Campbell credited his ability to communicate with the community.

"Chief Zack's background in building relationships with the community and years of experience as a chief will enable him to seamlessly transition into the role of Asheville's police chief," said Campbell.

Zack has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from Hilbert College, where he is also an instructor. He also serves as an instructor for the University of Tennessee National Forensic Academy. He had leadership roles in a number of national, state and local organizations of police chiefs.

The salary for police chief posted on the Asheville website lists a range from \$107,362 to \$171,779, plus a benefits package.

Zack, who currently earns at least \$145,000, said his salary in Asheville would be an improvement.

"I'm leaving a lot behind, a department I really loved," said Zack. "I've grown up here, you know? I'm driving by my house I grew up in, and I think, I'm leaving. I never even went away to college."