

New Gallup police chief sworn-in

Written by By Bernie Dotson Sun Correspondent
Friday, 01 July 2016 06:39



At \$100K annually, Hart in small company at City Hall

A law enforcement veteran with experience at the state and federal levels is now at the helm of the Gallup Police Department. Phillip Hart, 53, was sworn-in as police chief June 28 by Gallup Municipal Judge Grant Foutz in a specially called meeting prior to the regular city meeting.

Hart starts the \$100,000-a-year job July 1. The salary amount makes Hart one of the highest paid city employees, with City Attorney George Kozeliski, City Manager Maryann Ustick, and City Electric Director Richard Matzke the only other city workers pulling in six figure salaries on a yearly basis. At \$119,000 annually, Kozeliski is the top paid person working for the city. Ustick earns \$109,000, and Matzke brings in \$105,000 a year.

"I'm honored to be the chief of police for the city of Gallup, so thank you very much," Hart said to applause from a relatively crowded council chamber.

At least a dozen city and county police officers attended the swearing-in ceremony.

"I've got family in Gallup. I've been coming to Gallup for the past 35 years," Hart said.

Born in Jacksonville, Fla., Hart worked for the US Drug Enforcement Administration for a little more than two decades. He is a former police agent in Lakewood, Colo., and most recently worked in a law enforcement supervisory position in Albuquerque.

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Gallup Human Resources Director Klo Abeita said Hart's salary is the highest earned by a police department employee in recent memory. Abeita said former GPD Chief Robert Cron earned \$73,000 annually in the job.

Cron, a former New Mexico State Police officer, retired in March, with Lt. Franklin Boyd taking over as interim police chief. Prior to Cron, GPD Chief Sylvester Stanley earned \$82,000 a year. City Clerk Al Abeita said computer payroll records for police chiefs don't go back any further than that of Stanley.

Abeita said all but one city employee served on the interviewing committee that hired Hart: They were Abeita, Ustick, Gallup Fire Chief Eric Babcock, McKinley County Sheriff Ron Silversmith, and Jon DeYoung, who is the assistant to Ustick.

Phone calls put in to Mayor Jackie McKinney and Ustick on what warranted Hart's high salary amount were not returned as of press time.

City Councilor Fran Palochak weighed in on the new chief.

"I think he's a good hire," Palochak said. "I saw him at the council meeting and made it a point to say hello to him before the meeting started. One of the things I think we need is more patrols in some of our neighborhoods. I think most people around town would agree with that."

By Bernie Dotson
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