

Lawsuit Forces Fire Chief into Early Retirement



Carpinteria-Summerland's Michael Minge Accused of Bullying, Firing Department Whistleblowers

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This Tuesday, the board of directors of the Carpinteria-Summerland Fire Protection District will vote to part ways with Chief Michael Minge. His last day with the department will be July 31, a year and five months before his employment contract is scheduled to end.

The vote, all but preordained and quietly scheduled for the end of next week's regular board meeting, will be to formally accept Minge's request for early retirement, and it comes just a few days after a lawsuit against him was settled out of court. The exact terms of the settlement are not clear, but what is clear is the chief will leave his post early as a direct result of that litigation. Minge, 59, has headed the department since 2007.

The back-channel legal drama is also unfolding just as Carpinteria-Summerland voters rejected a \$10.65 million bond measure for the district. Measure Z would have funded the construction of a new Summerland fire station and major renovations of the existing Carpinteria station. Critics said the measure was too costly and poorly contrived. The district serves 23,000 South Coast residents in a 40-square-mile area. It

has an annual operating budget of \$8 million.

Mingee declined Thursday to comment on the lawsuit, the bond measure, or his imminent departure. He said he would issue a statement to the media after Tuesday's board meeting. Calls to his attorney were not returned, and the district's spokesperson did not respond to emails.

In November 2013, three Carpinteria-Summerland firefighters filed a lawsuit against Mingee and the district. The group, all members of the department's Health and Safety Committee, alleged they were harassed or fired, or both, after they voiced a litany of concerns about serious shortcomings in district operations.

They claimed firefighters weren't being provided proper training or equipment, and necessary fitness programs and tests were routinely ignored. The three said firefighters weren't allowed to submit documentation when they were exposed to hazardous materials and that engine teams often failed to follow the basic "two-in, two-out" rule, where two firefighters remain outside a burning building in case they need to rescue their two crewmates inside.

Just days after those grievances were aired, the lawsuit claims, Mingee started retaliating against the whistleblowers — firefighters Han Domini and Michael Hayek, and Battalion Chief Christopher Blair, who headed the Health and Safety Committee.

Domini had applied for a promotion to an engineer position and received high marks on three separate assessments. "Immediately following the test," the lawsuit states, "Chief Mingee demanded the examinations, took them home, and changed the test results to deny Domini the promotion."

When Blair, who had served in the City of Santa Barbara's Fire Department for 26 years prior to joining Carpinteria-Summerland in 2012, confronted Mingee about the manipulated scores, he was immediately fired without explanation. Mingee also reportedly circulated a picture of a snake wearing a firefighter helmet — representing Hayek — with the words "bad attitude" under it.

Mingee referred to the three men as "the cancer," and when he brought in an "outside investigator" to conduct an "internal investigation" into their safety complaints, that investigator openly called the whistleblowers "turds" who needed to be "managed out of the department," the complaint reads.

The lawsuit also claims that when the district's insurance underwriter conducted a field audit in response to the men's concerns, agents verified a slew of health and safety violations and decided to downgrade the district, resulting in higher costs to the department and taxpayers.

[During an interview](#) with *The Santa Barbara Independent* in December 2013 shortly after the lawsuit was filed, Mingee denied the accusations against him and the department. "The one that bothers me the most is the allegation that I would use cancer as a bullying tactic," said Mingee. "I've raised money for the efforts to fight that enemy," he said, explaining one of his family members suffered from the disease. "I don't want

people to think that the fire department is not doing its job,” he went on. “The district has nothing to hide. It’s all public record.”

Mingee began his firefighting career in 1976 working in various roles at a number of fire departments throughout Southern California’s Inland Empire. Before he took the helm of the Carpinteria-Summerland Fire Protection District, he served four years as chief of East Jefferson Fire Rescue in Port Townsend, Washington. During his tenure there, Mingee was sued by a volunteer firefighter for allegedly creating a hostile work environment and dismissing him without cause. That case was ultimately thrown out on technical grounds.

In 2013, the most recent figures available, Mingee earned approximately \$200,000 in base pay and benefits as Carpinteria-Summerland’s chief. Per the terms of his employment contract, he will reportedly receive a substantial payout from the district as a result of his self-initiated separation approved by the board. How much Mingee will be paid is unknown. A Public Records Act request submitted to district officials for that information is pending.

Questions have been raised by others about the district’s slow response time to a fatal house fire last month in neighboring Montecito. According to reports, it took an engine crew based at the Summerland fire station eight minutes to reach the burning home 1.1 miles away. The body of an 88-year-old woman would be found inside the residence near its front door.



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