

Sheriff Baca's retirement brings shock waves, political scrambling

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Sheriff Lee Baca's surprise retirement prompted two parallel furors on Tuesday — among county leaders, who must quickly pick an interim replacement, and among potential candidates who are reassessing a field that was dramatically altered by the departure of the 15-year incumbent.

Los Angeles County supervisors were preparing Tuesday afternoon to meet in private to begin discussions to pick an interim sheriff. Early support appeared to be building around Terri McDonald, a well-regarded assistant sheriff who was brought in from the state prison system to reform the county's troubled jails.

Although she is relatively new to the county sheriff's department, McDonald's supporters say she would be a strong interim replacement because of her ties to the state and her work on realignment and jails — two critical issues facing the county.

"I think the world of Terri McDonald. ... Terri McDonald is clearheaded, clear-thinking, clear-spoken, evidence-based, everything I admire in a public servant," said county Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, adding that he thought it was critical that the interim sheriff not be running for a permanent post.

Other names that are being floated are assistant sheriffs Todd Rogers and Jim Hellmold, and Long Beach Police Chief Jim McDonnell. "And there may be others," said Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas. "Processes



Sheriff Lee Baca steps down amid abuse allegations within department.

need to be set in place and we will then determine when we'll make that determination. ... The process begins in one form or another today."

Ridley-Thomas and others said they were surprised when they received phone calls at home from Baca late Monday night informing them about his retirement.

"I think it's fair to say that everyone was caught off guard by this. All indications had been that he was gearing up full force to seek reelection. Then we learned last evening of his intention to not seek reelection," Ridley-Thomas said.

"It was very shocking and very surprising," said Supervisor Gloria

Molina, adding that she thought Baca had "trusted people a little more than he should."

Baca's political consultant, Parke Skelton, was also surprised by the move. Baca called Skelton on Monday morning asking for a face-to-face meeting. Baca headed to Skelton's Pasadena office and broke the news that he would not run for election and planned to step down rather than serve the remainder of his fourth term.

Skelton said the sheriff told him he had been thinking over his future during the weekend and didn't believe that a highly contentious reelection campaign was in the best interests of the department or of himself.

The news took Skelton aback. Baca, he said, had previously been committed to fighting for reelection.

"It was clear that he had thought long and hard about it," Skelton said. "I didn't feel that it was up to me to persuade him otherwise."

Skelton, who worked on Baca's successful insurgent campaign to unseat Sheriff Sherman Block in 1998, said internal campaign polls showed that Baca was ahead of his political rivals but short of the 50% needed to avoid a runoff. The polling showed that the sheriff would likely face his former undersheriff, Paul Tanaka, in a bare-knuckled contest that Baca did not want.

"He's never been enthusiastic about politics as a blood sport," Skelton said. "I don't think it was fear of losing the campaign, I think it was the campaign itself. Win or lose the campaign, it was going to be an experience that he didn't want to go through or put the department through."

The move dramatically altered the political race to replace him. Tanaka and former Commander Bob Olmsted had been the main challengers in the race, but the field was expected to grow with the news of Baca's imminent retirement.

"You're going to open the floodgates for qualified candidates," said Lloyd Greif, past chairman of the Board of Directors of the Los Angeles Police Foundation and a Baca critic. "If there was ever an opportunity for a strong candidate outside the department to win this election, now is the time."

But they would have to move quickly, with the filing deadline weeks away and a need to raise serious campaign cash and raise their name identification in a county of 10 million residents before the June primary.

The first out of the gate Tuesday was Asst. Sheriff Rogers, who announced he would run.

"My calling card will be back to basics," Rogers said. "There has been catastrophic failure of leadership in the Sheriff's Department."

Hellmold said he has not made a decision whether to run.

"I am a crime fighter," he said. "I



Deputies' conduct has been the subject of criticism as well as a federal investigation.

am not a politician."

The biggest question mark is Long Beach Police Chief McDonnell, who weighed a run last year. Attempts to reach him Tuesday were unsuccessful, but a source close to McDonnell said a run is likely in the works.

"I fully expect Jim to run for L.A. County sheriff — I would be shocked if he didn't," said Greif, who is a confidant of McDonnell.

Baca, in announcing his retirement Tuesday morning, declined to endorse a candidate in the race.

Baca has been sheriff since 1998, and had forged deep ties with diverse communities, but had faced a drumbeat of scandals recently.

His announcement came a month after federal prosecutors filed criminal charges against 18 current and former sheriff's deputies accused of beating jail inmates and visitors, trying to obstruct the FBI and other crimes following an investigation of corruption inside the nation's largest jail system.

Baca was also coping with searing criticism of his leadership from a blue-ribbon commission appointed by the Board of Supervisors to examine allegations of jail abuse.

Last year, the U.S. Department of Justice accused sheriff's deputies of engaging in widespread unlawful searches of homes, improper detentions and unreasonable force as Antelope Valley authorities conducted a systematic effort to discriminate against African Americans who re-

ceived low-income subsidized housing.

More recently, The Times also reported that the department had hired dozens of officers in 2010 despite background investigations that found they had committed significant misconduct.

At the news conference Tuesday, Baca — who spent 48 years with the department including 15 as sheriff — was at times emotional as he explained his decision, which he said he made three days ago.

"I will go out on my terms," Baca, 71, said. "The reasons for doing so are so many, most personal and private."

Baca insisted his decision to step down was "based on the highest of concern for the future of the Sheriff's Department." He repeatedly cited the upcoming campaign, which he said had already brought a "negative perception" to the agency.

"I don't see myself as the future," he said. "I see myself as part of the past."

He said his greatest accomplishment would be reducing crime rates, and he commended his deputies for their work.

"They have conducted themselves with the utmost integrity and professionalism resulting in yet another year of historic crime reductions in nearly half a century," he said. "In my opinion, your Sheriff's Department is the greatest law enforcement agency in the world."