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Ex-fire Official Accused of Using Slur Files Lawsuit

BREWSTER, NY - A former assistant fire chief in Brewster who was expelled for using a racial slur against fellow firefighters has filed a \$10 million federal lawsuit against the department and is seeking reinstatement.

William J. Ratajack Jr., who was booted from the volunteer department in August, admitted in his Jan. 2 lawsuit that he uttered the "N-word" at two white firefighters during a July tirade. His lawsuit claims the targets didn't hear the slur and points out that they weren't even black.

Ratajack, 47, said he served a 30-day suspension and was expelled after a hearing he was not informed of nor allowed to participate in.

Ratajack claims he was denied due process and expelled for expressing himself on department protocol and procedure. He is suing the fire department, its board, the fire district and several individuals.

"He has a right as anyone does ... to have the opportunity to defend himself. The board chose to do an investigation – and I'd put quotation marks around the word investigation – without hearing from him or the majority of people who were there," his attorney, Elisabeth Seieroe Maurer, said Friday.

Ratajack claims his problems began with Martin Miller and his sons, Michael and Steven, all Brewster firefighters. The lawsuit says Ratajack once employed Michael Miller at his business, Southeast Mechanical Corp.

Ratajack was a captain in spring 2009 when, he claims, Steven Miller started a petition to remove him.

The bad blood between Ratajack and the Millers came to a head July 11, 2013, after the Mahopac Fire Department parade. By then, Ratajack was first assistant chief.

Story Highlights

- Ex-assistant chief admits using 'N-word' directed at two white firefighters
- Claims he was denied due process when ousted from volunteer fire department
- Suit seeks reinstatement and \$10.2 million in damages



Ratajack and other members marched in dress uniform and went afterward to the Mahopac firehouse to socialize. But when Ratajack arrived, he saw Steven Miller and at least one other Brewster firefighter outside. They were not in uniform and did not march in the parade yet were socializing. Ratajack felt they should not be there.

"Ratajack exploded, spewing obnoxious and derogatory words and phrases about the non-participating members, including every swear word Ratajack could think of at the moment," the lawsuit said.

Five days later, Chief Bill Rieg confronted Ratajack about the slur and suspended him for 30 days. Then on July 22, Martin Miller sent a letter to the Board of Fire Commissioners asking that Ratajack be removed for racial discrimination and harassing his family, the suit claims. That prompted the hearing that led to Ratajack's expulsion.

Ratajack wants to be restored as first assistant chief and receive \$10.2 million in damages.

Reached at home Friday, Martin Miller said he could not comment without permission from department officials. Messages left for fire commissioners and the fire district's attorney were not returned.