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# News



## Ex-fire captain testifies of picking up women in engines

**By Christina Jewett -- Bee Staff Writer**  
*Published 2:15 am PDT Thursday, August 18, 2005*  
*Story appeared in Metro section, Page B1*

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In the first public termination hearing for a Sacramento firefighter accused of on-duty misconduct, a city attorney grilled a former fire department captain about riding through midtown with a woman on his lap, responding to fires in engines with women met earlier in bars and turning in a false report about the events.

The ex-captain, Steven Conti, sat in a small, tense administrative hearing room downtown as two men who served on his crew testified against him.

Defense attorneys are arguing that Conti's behavior is part of a pattern of on-duty carousing that speaks more of an ingrained culture than of Conti, who was terminated in January and now works as a garbage truck driver for the city of



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The hearing, expected to last two days, is a forum for Conti to fight to get his job back. The city has the burden of proving Conti should be fired. A decision is expected within in 90 days.

"There were numerous cases of joyriding, giving women rides and drinking alcohol with his subordinates," the city's attorney, Larry Duran, said. "By his example, (Conti) encouraged his subordinates to engage in misconduct ... and encouraged them to cover it up."

A broad investigation into firefighters' behavior launched after city officials learned that firefighters attended a Porn Star Costume Ball at the Radisson Hotel in July 2004 has resulted in 24 disciplinary actions, ranging from termination to oral reprimands. Two firefighters resigned in lieu of dismissal.

Much of Wednesday's testimony revolved around what Conti called "going for a putt," or cruising, according to testimony.

Conti described events of June 25, 2004. That night, he said, he and three crew members picked up four women at the Ink restaurant and bar and two at the Zebra Club in midtown.

At one point, they took the women from the Ink about 15 blocks to the Zebra Club, where a crew on Engine 1 "wanted to see the women," firefighter Charles "Dwayne" Clayborne testified.

During the evening, four women went back to their Oak Park station 6 with the crew. Just as they arrived, the crew was called to a house fire.

After the crew determined the call was a false report, Clayborne said, he returned to find the women "ducking in the cab."

Later, the crew went to a grass fire and a car fire, then back to the station because another crew there wanted to talk to the women again - all before taking the women back to midtown, Clayborne said.

Firefighter Mark Swink testified that an intoxicated woman complained of the firefighters' carousing at the Zebra Club early that night, but when he told Conti, the captain, using profanities, dismissed her concerns. The woman later filed a complaint that launched a probe into the night's events.

Conti said he spoke to his superiors about the woman's allegation of misconduct, deciding to file a report about it in an e-mail. He said he wrote it at 12:04 a.m. July 1, 2004, after having a few beers.

In the e-mail, he wrote that the women who rode on the engine were family friends of his. Conti said he called his three crew members about forms they planned to file about the night.

"Did you tell them, 'We all have to be on the same page?'" Duran asked Conti.

"I don't recall making that statement," Conti said. "Could I have? I could have."

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Swink testified that he "had problems" with the way fellow crew members were filing their reports, testifying that his car's tires were slashed and a dead rat turned up in his home mailbox after all the paperwork had been filed.

Clayborne also filed a report calling the women "family friends" of Conti's, saying he believed it to be true.

In testimony, Conti said it was not.

A third firefighter who was present that night in June did not testify Wednesday.

City attorney's officials also questioned Conti about instances of drinking alcohol on duty. On Jan. 28, 2004, Conti testified that he consumed a shot glass of a drink that contained Kahlua in a back room of Cheaters Sports Bar in east Sacramento.

He said Clayborne set up a toast for the crew to celebrate Conti's completion of probation after his promotion to captain.

Conti testified that Clayborne had two shots and operated the engine afterward.

In another instance, Conti said, his crew came to him after he returned from vacation and admitted to drinking rum and Coke while playing dominoes on duty.

"I brought the crew in and said, 'I wasn't there, but it ends right now,' " Conti said.

Clayborne testified that in his 18-year fire career he had been on a truck or engine in seven instances that involved picking up women. He said he drank on duty with two other captains, who have subsequently been disciplined.

On Thursday, defense attorney Etan Rosen will present his case before administrative law judge Ann Sarli.

#### **ABOUT THE WRITER:**

The Bee's Christina Jewett can be reached at 916-321-1201 or [cjewett@sacbee.com](mailto:cjewett@sacbee.com).

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