Richmond Police Chief Chris Magnus has been selected as the leading candidate to head the Tucson Police Department. While the new job doesn’t come with a raise, it does come with new challenges: leading a large police force in a border city more than five times the size of Richmond.

The Tucson City Council voted unanimously Tuesday evening to accept the city manager’s recommendation.

Richmond city leaders say they’ll miss a chief they credit with slashing Richmond’s murder rate and improving community-police relations.

“We wish him the best,” Mayor Tom Butt said. “He has changed the culture in our Police Department.”

When Magnus came to Richmond in 2006 from Fargo, North Dakota, the department had a reputation for corruption and violence stretching back to the 1980s. And many in the city doubted whether this gay white cop would be able to make a dent in Richmond’s sky-high murder rate.
Now, Magnus has received national attention for his focus on community-police relationships. He put officers back on beats and asked his department to deal with quality-of-life issues that affect neighborhoods, like blight and illegal dumping. Magnus also implemented a number of cutting-edge police technologies, such as ShotSpotter, COMPSTAT and body cameras.

The results have been dramatic. The number of homicides in the city of about 105,000 fell from 49 in 2007 and 2009 to 11 in 2014.

While some residents fear Magnus’ exit will mean a return to higher crime levels, many agree with Janis Mara, who took to Richmond’s community Facebook page, “TherealRICH,” to wish the chief well.

“I still realize that the mature thing to do is to congratulate our beloved Chief – which I do, with all my heart,” she posted. “But I am so very sad and will miss this exemplary chief who did so very much for our city.”

But it hasn’t always been a smooth ride for Magnus.

In 2012, seven black officers filed a lawsuit against the chief that alleged racism and unfair promotion practices. Ultimately, a jury rejected the allegations. This April, when a lawsuit was filed against Magnus for sexual harassment, city officials and police officers swiftly came to his defense.

In 2014, Magnus again made headlines when he held up a sign reading “#BlackLivesMatter” at a protest in Richmond. The photograph went viral — and controversy erupted. The department’s Police Officers Association accused the chief of political speech while in uniform. But Magnus didn’t back down.

“The idea that black lives matter is something that I would think we should all be able to agree upon,” Magnus told KPIX at the time.

This year, Richmond has seen an uptick both in armed robberies and homicides, but many in the community trust the path that Magnus has set the department on. Mayor Tom Butt said that while City Manager Bill Lindsay will be in charge of the search for a new chief, he has an idea where to look.

“I think we first ought to look inside the department,” Butt said. “I think there’s some very capable people there who have participated in the culture that Chris Magnus has created for the last nine years. And I think we can find somebody there who will do a good job.”