

Winter Park changing firefighters pension policy

By Yvonne C.T. Vassel

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

WINTER PARK — The city is preparing an ordinance to change the Winter Park Firemen's Pension Trust Fund so firefighters can claim full retirement benefits after 25 years of service, regardless of their age.

Two other changes proposed by the fund's five-member board of trustees — to increase pension payments to 11 current retirees and change the way pensions are calculated — are being studied by city officials to determine the cost and effect of the changes on the city's other pension plans.

The firefighters fund is the city's oldest pension plan. It started in 1939; the police pension fund was set up in 1953. Other city employees did not get a pension plan until 1966.

Firefighters contribute 6 percent of their salary to the fund, police contribute 6.3 percent to their fund and general employees make no contribution to theirs. In 1984 the city contributed \$32,357 to the police fund, \$41,267 to the firefighters and \$130,883 to the general employees fund.

Currently firefighters who retire after 25 years, but before they are 55 years old, get reduced pensions. In contrast, the police pension fund provides normal retirement benefits to

those who have 20 years' service or who are 60 years old, said fire inspector George Hulette, the fund's trustee-secretary.

The city commission agreed to the request to give firefighters full pensions and authorized City Manager David Harden to draft an ordinance for the change. The other two requests will be discussed again at one of the commission's September meetings.

Hulette asked that the current retirees get a 10 percent monthly increase in their pensions.

"Our plan has no cost-of-living clause," Hulette said in an Aug. 9 memorandum to Harden. "We have people receiving as little as \$27.92 per

month. Five of the 11 receive less than \$100 per month."

In his recommendation to the commission, Harden said the city was not obligated to give the increase because retirees knew what they would be getting.

"However, no one anticipated the rapid inflation which took place in the '70s," added Harden.

The third request, to have future pensions based on a firefighter's average salary during the best three of the last five years of service, also is being studied. Pensions currently are based on the average of the best five of the last 10 years of service.