

# Fire chief forced out of Utah job may take post in Winter Park

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By Karen Pankowski

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WINTER PARK — A former Salt Lake City fire chief who resigned under pressure last year is expected to be approved today as the new head of Winter Park's fire department.

City Manager Tony Barrett picked Dennis Sargent, 48, from 135 applicants for the chief's job, which has been open since November. Barrett's decision must be approved by the City Commission. If he is approved, Sargent will begin work Wednesday at an annual salary of \$55,830.

Sargent, who served 18 months as Salt Lake City's fire chief, was asked to resign in July by Mayor Palmer DePaulis. The *Deseret News* reported the mayor cited "a lack of chemistry" between Sargent and the department and said the chief lacked motivation and communication skills.

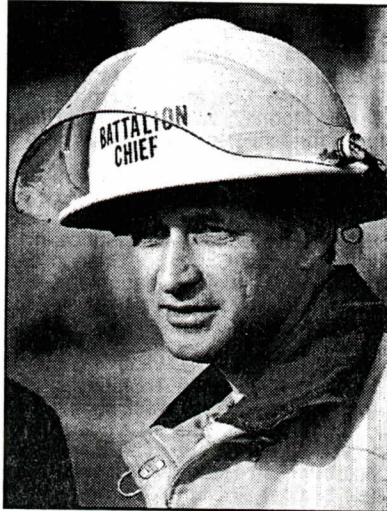
In addition, Sargent was criticized for recommending the department buy a \$500,000 ladder platform truck that some firefighters said was a lemon.

In an interview Monday, Sargent said the criticism was unwarranted. He said he was ousted because of politics and because he was hired from the outside to clean up a slow-moving department where previous chiefs had been figureheads.

"I was brought in to do a job," said Sargent, who made \$61,000 a year in Salt Lake. "It was an unpopular job, but I did the job very well."

During his time in office, he disciplined three paramedics for using drugs while on duty. He also negotiated the department's first multiyear firefighters contract and established an emergency plan in case of an earthquake.

As for the truck, Sargent said he agreed to buy it at the recommendation of his subordinates, including a battalion chief who later publicly criticized its effectiveness.



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Sargent, chosen from 135 applicants, may be paid \$55,830.

Barrett said he chose Sargent, a former Myrtle Beach, S.C., fire chief and battalion captain in Sarasota, because of his experience and background.

He said he was aware of what happened in Salt Lake City and believes it was clearly a matter of politics.

"He went into a difficult situation there," Barrett said. "They were out to do anything they could to make sure he would not succeed."

Mayor David Johnston said he will vote to hire Sargent today. "I think the gentleman is very well-qualified, and I'm very pleased to have him accept the job," he said.

The city fire department has been rocked recently by allegations that firefighters watched X-rated videotapes on the job, as well as by internal disputes. City officials have said the department has been hurt by a lack of leadership. Chief Duane Mehl resigned last fall for what he said were personal reasons.

Sargent said his top priorities in Winter Park would be to foster better communication within the department and with City Hall. He also wants to promote fire education and prevention programs.