

# Score One For The City ; Firefighters Out Of Union

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In a vote which came as a surprise to few people in Winter Park City Hall, Winter Park Fire Department employees gave the city their Christmas present Tuesday by voting 32-1 for union decertification from PERC, the Public Employees Relations Committee.

Once the vote is formally approved by PERC, it will mean the firefighters will no longer have the union as their official bargaining agent.

**THEY WILL** seek pay raises, bonuses and other benefits the same way every other city employee seeks them: through their supervisor or by going directly to city Manager David T. Harden.

That's a gift to the city--which resented PERC for "dictating to them about how they're going to negotiate," according to members of Winter Park Firefighters Local 1598.

**FIREFIGHTERS** acknowledged the city's antagonism toward state regulations and PERC when they held a press conference two months ago to announce that union members would not ratify their newly-negotiated contract and would seek decertification from PERC instead.

City officials and union officials have consistently denied that promises were made by the city to fire department employees in exchange for their seeking decertification.

Firefighters said they were confident, however, that the benefits agreed on in the negotiated contract would eventually be passed on to employees even though the contract was never ratified.

**ONE OF** the first benefits from that contract to be passed on to employees--the payment of incentive pay to fire department employees assigned as EMT IIs (paramedics)--was approved by the city commission last Tuesday, a week before the election for decertification.

Under that benefit, the city will pay a lump sum of \$520 in incentive pay each year on the anniversary of the entitled employees' EMT II certification date. That amount will be forfeited in full if an EMT II resigns in the first two years and will be paid on a prorated basis after the second year.

During discussions of the benefit, Commissioner Jerome J. Donnelly at first argued that it should not be prorated until after four or five years because of the expense to the city of training EMT IIs.

**DONNELLY** withdrew his objection, however, when assistant city manager Rick Fitzgerald pointed out that this system of payment was one agreed on in collective bargaining.

"In all fairness, we couldn't back down on that without going back to negotiations, in view of the firefighters pursuing decertification from PERC," Fitzgerald told Donnelly.

City Manager David Harden said this week that it was his understanding of PERC regulations that even though the firefighters' contract had not been ratified by them or the city, any change in the agreement would still have to be discussed with them.

"Anytime you change a benefit for a union employee, you have to go back and at least discuss it with the union," Harden said, adding that this PERC regulation was the basis for an unfair labor practices suit which the union has filed against the city.

**ONCE THE** decertification vote is official, Harden said Tuesday, it will no longer be necessary to consult with firefighters about benefit changes, but he said he would anyway.

"They might not agree with the change, but at least we would try to inform them," said Harden, adding that "one of the problems we've had in the past is poor communications with employees. It's something we've worked very hard to overcome."

Assistant city manager Fitzgerald said Tuesday the city has no immediate plans to present any other benefits for firefighters for commission approval.

"**WE HAVEN'T** really thought it over that much yet," he said. "We'll be reviewing all our benefits around mid-year."

Fitzgerald said the results from the union vote for decertification will be officially confirmed by PERC after five working days pass and no one challenges the election results.