

# Firefighters claim problems have been smouldering in department 'for years'

By MISSY CLARK  
Staff Writer

In the wake of Fire Chief Mike Molthop's recent resignation, members of the local firefighters union and representatives from the state Public Employees Relation Commission are meeting with city administrative officials to address problems in the fire department which firefighters say have been brewing for several years and have gone unanswered by the city.

Meetings began this week to determine which positions within the fire department will be included in the bargaining unit when contract negotiations get under way between the city and local firefighters union.

Lieutenants Bob Ferrell and Larry Niren, president and vice-president (respectively) of the local firefighters union, claim the city has been "underhanded" in trying to exclude lieutenants from the labor bargaining unit by rewriting job descriptions to portray lieutenants' jobs as managerial positions.

"We're not in management capacities,"

said Ferrell. "The job descriptions they've come up with are not correct, and they're also not legal."

Job descriptions, like all police and firefighter policies, must be reviewed and approved by the Civil Service Board before they are legal. Ferrell and Niren say that neither the Civil Service Board nor the firefighters themselves have seen the new job descriptions.

"The city is trying to defeat the union by underhandedly slipping in these new job descriptions that give us (lieutenants) a managerial appearance," said Ferrell.

According to Ferrell, the newly rewritten job descriptions do not coincide at all with lieutenants' actual duties.

The new job description states that lieutenants' duties include responding to fires as the officer in charge, helping to formulate pay policy, recommending pay increases and promotions, determining the need for disciplinary action, determining the method of attacking a fire and supervising rescue and emergency operations as the officer in charge.

"We don't do any of that," said Ferrell.

"The battalion chief is the responding officer in charge of fires and the paramedics are in charge of rescue operations. We don't help formulate any policy or attend any staff meetings, because we're not considered part of the staff. I'm classified as a non-administrative, non-executive employee; it's right here on my evaluation sheet.

"What lieutenants are, basically, are in-house floor supervisors," said Ferrell. "We look after day-to-day operations but we're not involved in decision-making processes."

Assistant City Manager John Litton said the city management has the right to rewrite job descriptions and has done so because "we believe the lieutenants are part of management.

"They write job reports, performance evaluations, and oversee the operations of the station during their shifts. If that's not management, then I don't know what is," he said. "But that's what will be decided at these hearings by the Public Employees Relation Commission."

Litton said the city administration was

not underhanded in rewriting the job descriptions and that they are legal, although he said he did not know if the Civil Service Board had seen new descriptions yet.

Ferrell said that by giving lieutenants a managerial job description, the city may be able to eliminate nine people from the union bargaining side, which would give the city a distinct advantage over the union.

"The city (administration) has said they'll expend unlimited funds and effort to defeat the union, and that's what they're trying to do," said Ferrell.

Ferrell and Niren said they will ask that the ranks of lieutenant and below be included in the union bargaining unit, but Litton said they had requested that the assistant chief, battalion chief and "practically every rank except chief and the secretary" be included in the bargaining unit.

"It doesn't seem right that supervisors should be included in the labor side's bargaining unit, and we're exercising our rights in that respect," said Litton.

Ferrell and Niren said the job descrip-

*Please see Fire on Page 12A*



# Fire

Part 2

Continued from Page 1A

tion dispute is just one of a number of problems that have contributed to poor relations between the city and the fire department and morale problems within the department itself.

Inadequate fire trucks and equipment, poor maintenance by city mechanics, unfair pay distribution, and an inadequate training program are some of the problems the union hopes to solve when contract negotiations begin, said Ferrell and Niren.

"What we're asking for is not ridiculous," said Ferrell. "It's really very basic, nothing that every other department in the area doesn't already have."

Ferrell said relations between the city and the fire department have deteriorated over the years, and their department's repeated requests have fallen on deaf ears.

The strained relations have contributed to the high turnover rate of key personnel, said Niren, including the recent resignation of Chief Mike Molthrop.

"I think Mike did his best to make this a progressive department but his hands were tied," Niren went on to say that the city is having to advertise nationally for the position of fire chief because no one in-house or locally wants the position.

"It's interesting... in any job I've ever had, when the chief leaves, there should be four or five people in line for the position, but nobody here wants it."

Litton denied that Molthrop's reasons for resigning were job-related, and Molthrop himself has stated publicly that his reasons were personal and not related to any particular tensions or problems with his job.

"Our consensus in the fire department is that the people in city hall are very uncaring," said Ferrell. "We're just numbers on paychecks to them. They have

very little regard to problems with our pay plan, poor equipment, lack of a proper training program and our need for better equipment. They give garbage trucks higher priority than fire trucks."

Litton disagreed that relations between the city and the department are strained, and added that city management has no operational control over the policies of the police and fire departments.

"That's the job of the Civil Service Board."

As far as prioritizing city vehicles, Litton said he has listed and stated publicly that police vehicles are first in priority, followed by fire service vehicles and, thirdly, utility vehicles.

"I think fire service equipment is germane to the function of the fire department, and we give the day to day operations of those vehicles top priority. Maybe some mistakes have been made, but they also may not be taking care of the equipment properly."

When actual contract negotiations begin will depend on how long the job description hearings last, said Litton. The Public Employees Relation Commission, a state agency which acts as a neutral advisory board, will determine which job descriptions should be included in the union bargaining unit.