

WP's firefighters vote for collective bargaining with city

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Firefighters in Winter Park voted unanimously last Friday to certify Local 1598, Winter Park Professional Firefighters Union, as their bargaining unit.

Lts. Bob Ferrell and Larry Niren will head the union as president and vice-president, respectively, although they will not be allowed to take part in the bargaining process.

The Public Employees Relations Commission ruled Sept. 11 that lieutenants and the fire inspector be excluded from the union bargaining unit. The state commission reaffirmed that ruling Oct. 11, after a union appeal which charged that the city had misled the commission into believing lieutenants held management positions and responsibilities when, in fact, they do not.

PERC's decision was based on testimony from firefighters and from the city administrative staff during public hearings last June.

Ferrell and Niren, who have led the union campaign since last spring, said the city rewrote job descriptions for lieutenants just days before those hearings, specifically for the purpose of persuading the commission to rule in the city's favor.

The new job descriptions require lieutenants to evaluate fire employees

for merit pay increases. Battalion chiefs previously were responsible for those evaluations.

Representatives for the city told PERC in June that the new job descriptions had been approved earlier in the year.

But, as the union pointed out to PERC in its appeal last month, the new job descriptions did not go into effect until Oct. 1. The union argued that lieutenants should be included in the bargaining unit because job evaluations were performed not by them but

rather by battalion chiefs both before the June hearings and after the Sept. 11 ruling.

The PERC commission upheld its ruling, however, citing a supervisory conflict of interest as its basis.

After the election Friday, Niren said they will continue to pursue action to have union representation for lieutenants and other supervisory personnel, excluding the chief and assistant chief.

Niren and Ferrell are also looking
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into the city's efforts against the union both before and after the PERC ruling. "We're finding out what they did and how much they spent in fighting the union," said Niren. "They spent a fortune on legal fees alone."

Out of 27 eligible firefighters, 26 participated in the union election; all voting in favor.

John Litton, assistant city manager and personnel director, said that

although he had hoped the union would not pass, he was not surprised by the election.

"I knew it would go through; I never even gave it a second thought," said Litton. "and the city will certainly comply with the law. I expect we'll sit down now in the near future and begin collective bargaining. It's going to have to be a process of give and take."

City pensions may change

Responding to proposals from both the police and firefighters' pension boards, the city commission met at City Hall Monday to discuss possible changes in pension plans for city employees.

The purpose of the work session was to begin setting goals and objectives to follow in revising employee pension plans.

Three pension plans currently exist for city employees: one for police, one for fire and one for general employees. Without general guidelines and a framework within which to consider proposed changes, the city commission could be faced with conflicts from each of the three plans trying to outdo the others.

John Litton, assistant city manager and personnel director, said that the separate pension policies are needed because of differing natures of and responsibilities involved in different jobs.

"Each category of employee (fire, police and general) has its own pension and benefits policy, but we need to set objective goals to work toward for all pensions," said Litton.

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