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Service board to study relations with firefighters

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OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

WINTER PARK — The city Civil Service Board on Thursday was supposed to consider taking a vote of confidence in Fire Chief Mike Molthop. The vote was never taken.

The board did vote to collect information on whether firefighters were being discouraged from attending the board's meetings and did not have enough access to their elected board representative, Fire Marshal James Humphrey.

Board chairman James Moreland called the special meeting Thursday because, he said, it appeared the chief had not been honest with the board about a plan to move a member of the department's fire prevention bureau to the city's building department.

City Manager David Harden said the purpose of the move is to concentrate the review of plans for new construction and major renovations in one office. He said there have been many incidents of builders being given conflicting interpretations of how something should be done.

Moreland said Molthop, at the board's Dec. 4 meeting, led members to believe the plan was in a preliminary stage. But a subsequent newspaper article, which said the city com-

mission had approved the idea, as well as conversations with city employees, made him think the fire chief had deliberately misled the board.

The meeting Thursday was attended by about 30 firefighters, Harden and John Litton, the assistant city manager-personnel director. Harden said on the advice of one of the city's attorneys he directed Molthop not to attend the meeting.

"On the agenda the chairman had indicated the possibility of preferring charges against the fire chief. That's a serious matter. I felt it was not appropriate for him [Molthop] to be here for an informal discussion on something which could later lead to charges," said Harden.

Harden also said that because the reorganization idea was his, he believed he probably knew more about the issue than Molthop.

Moreland first tried to have Anne Hamilton, the board's chief examiner, investigate whether Molthop had misled the board at its Dec. 4 meeting. That was stymied by Harden, who said a majority of the board must vote for such an investigation.

"I don't think it's appropriate for you as chairman to ask for an investigation," Harden told Moreland.

Board member Richard Proctor said he wanted to hear Harden explain the

reorganization plan before going any further.

"I'm not sure it's worthy of jumping to a formal investigation without knowing what we're talking about," said Proctor.

Harden said he has been thinking about the reorganization since 1978. Many questions need to be answered before the plan can be carried out and the city's final action may bear little resemblance to current plans, he said.

Harden said he reviewed tapes of the Dec. 4 meeting and does not think the fire chief misled the board. Molthrop could not answer some questions posed by the board because the city still is seeking those answers, he said.

Hamilton said she was concerned that moving the review of new construction entirely to the building department could lead to safety problems because concerns of the building department and the fire department are not always the same.

"The building department is as concerned about building safety as the fire department is. The city is exposed to a lot of liability either way," Harden said.

Moreland said he had heard that some firefighters were questioned about their attendance at board meetings while they were off duty and also that they did not have enough opportunity to meet with Humphrey.

Hamilton said an investigation into those allegations would be in everyone's best interest.

Harden said he was satisfied with the meeting's outcome.

"There are a lot of things that could have taken place that didn't. Mr. Moreland and other members of the board handled the matter well," Harden said.

Although the board does not have to approve the reorganization plan when it is finalized, Harden said he will try to keep members informed on developments.

Proctor said the meeting helped defuse a situation that had the potential to get out of hand.

"It let the city know the [board] wants to be an active part of decisions affecting civil service employees. The purpose of the meeting was to benefit the fire chief as well as the firefighters. He's been in the hot seat without any protection," Proctor said.

Hamilton said she plans to complete her investigation by the board's Feb. 4 meeting.