

# Winter Garden seeks rescue, fire agreement

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OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

WINTER GARDEN — To a person standing in his yard in his pajamas watching his house burn down, the name on the side of the fire truck that arrives first isn't important.

That's why City Manager Hollis Holden wants west Orange County to adopt a fire and rescue response plan similar to one expected to go into effect next month in Winter Park.

A five-way agreement among city and county agencies in the Winter Park area will virtually erase the borders between jurisdictions. When calls come in, dispatchers will send the closest fire trucks and ambulances, choosing from stations in Winter Park, Maitland, Orange County, Seminole County and Altamonte Springs.

Holden says the same kind of arrangement could work for Winter Garden, Ocoee, Oakland and Orange County.

"You would not see yellow or white on this map, you would see who is the closest unit to respond," he said. "And that unit might be Ocoee going into Winter Garden."

A map depicting Winter Garden shows several pockets of unincorporated land within the city — including a large tract just two blocks from the fire station.

If a fire were to occur there now,

## What it means

A first-response or automatic-aid concept provides borderless protection in emergencies, drawing from the fire stations of several agencies. Dispatchers will send the closest vehicles to an emergency regardless of where it occurs.

Winter Garden would battle it under an \$85,000 annual contract paid by the county.

That arrangement expires in September, and Orange County has said it won't renew. The county recently took over Oakland's fire station, which puts county rescuers close enough to Winter Garden to take care of the territory after the contract expires.

But that system would be a step backward, Holden said. He points to a consultant's study released in December 1992 that recommended Orange County improve its fire and rescue service by expanding the first-response concept or merging departments.

Nevertheless, Holden's proposal has not received support from officials in the county or Ocoee, who say they're satisfied with the arrangements they have now.

"I understand what he's saying, and I don't mind having an agree-

## Winter Park OKs first-response pact

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ment," Ocoee City Manager Ellis Shapiro said. "But it's not needed."

Instead, Ocoee and Winter Garden both have mutual aid agreements with the county, which means they assist each other in emergencies that are too large for one agency to handle. The two cities don't have mutual aid agreements.

Orange County recently proposed taking over Winter Garden's fire service, but city com-

missioners turned down the offer at Holden's urging.

The city doubted the county's claims that it could save Winter Garden about \$250,000 a year. City officials also were worried the county would not keep Winter Garden's firefighters and equipment.

In Winter Park, rescue officials are looking forward to working under a first-response agreement, Fire Chief Dennis Sargent said.

"We see this as more of a preparation for that large disaster or large fire that goes beyond the resources we have available," he

said.

The arrangement will be especially helpful in areas such as Howell Branch, where boundaries seem intertwined among Maitland, Winter Park and unincorporated Orange and Seminole counties.

That's popping up more and more as cities annex areas outside their borders — a practice that is booming in west Orange, Holden said.

"You're no longer seeing isolated little towns with large expanses of county in between."

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