

Despite accident, city won't buy rescue equipment

By VICTOR ASSERSON

Vital rescue equipment borrowed by Winter Park Fire Department to free a girl trapped under an 18-ton bus, will not be bought by the city.

The equipment -- air bags which are used to lift heavy objects -- were rushed by Maitland fire-fighters to an accident outside Winter Park Mall last Wednesday after 11-year-old Nicole Lorrius, of People Avenue, Eatonville, slipped and fell under the bus she was running to catch.

She was trapped under the double back wheels of the bus and the only safe way to get her out was by using the air bags which were placed under the bus and inflated, raising the bus so she could be pulled to safety.

Even though the Fire Department underspent its equipment budget by about \$4,400 last year, Fire Chief Mike Molt-hop said that the air bags are not high on the priority list of equipment needed by the Fire Department.

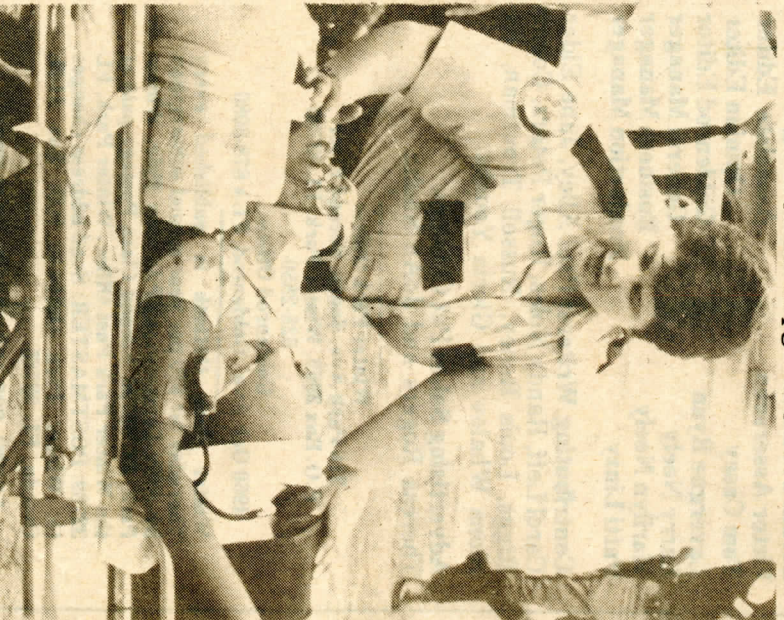
The bags have not been ordered because they are rarely used and are available from Maitland Fire Department with which Winter Park Fire Department has a mutual aid agreement.

Under this agreement neighboring fire departments help each other out, including giving coverage at fire stations left empty while crews are attending to emergencies, as happened during the accident on Wednesday.

Fire Chief Molt-hop said that the air bags were a "specialized piece of equipment with limited uses."

"We have never needed them before and if we had I would have called Maitland and will again if I need the air bags.

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Paramedics attend to 11-year-old Nicole Lorrius after the Wednesday accident.

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"We lack a lot of equipment. There is no way that this city can budget for and buy all the equipment that we lack. You have to evaluate the need for an item so we can perform our task," said Moltrop.

Moltrop said that under mutual aid Winter Park has given the use of the tower truck to Maitland, which does not have one and so Winter Park was entitled to ask Maitland for the use of its equipment.

Asked what would happen if Winter Park needed the use of the air bags but they were being used by Maitland, Moltrop replied, "I am not going to answer 'what if's' or 'buts'."

"Any way we can help Maitland we will and I'm confident they will try and help us. We try to work together. That is what mutual aid is all about," he added.

Maitland's deputy fire chief, Ernest Park, said that the eight air bags used by Maitland cost between \$8,000 and \$10,000.

"We have had them about two years. You never know when you are going to need them. We consider them vital pieces of rescue equipment," said Deputy Chief Park.

Moltrop's view about the airbags is supported by City Manager David Harden, who said that he would not recommend the purchase of the air bags.

"I think it would be foolish to buy everything that is available. You cannot afford to have total protection against everything.

"I would not recommend the purchase of the airbags because they are rarely used and they are available in Maitland. If they were needed we would buy it. If the equipment is not needed we are not going to spend money. There is no reason to duplicate those things which are not frequently used," said Harden.

Asked what would happen if Maitland was using its air bags and Winter Park needed the rescue equipment, Harden replied, "The odds of it being in use when we need it is probably a million to one. I don't know the exact figure but you could work out the odds."

Moltrop said that he was having discussions with Maitland Fire Chief Sid Ballou to see where duplication of equipment could be cut out.

The 11-year-old girl, who was taken to Florida South Hospital, was said to be doing "great." She suffered a broken toe and bruises and lacerations to the legs, thighs and stomach, said a Winter Park Police spokesman. No charges will be made against bus driver Andrew Steven Scott, 42, of Orlando.

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