

Conflict

Winter Park, fire fighters at odds over contract negotiations

By MARY HEFFRON

Each week for more than a month, representatives of the city of Winter Park and its fire fighters union have met to negotiate a contract spelling out the conditions under which the fire fighters will work.

And while those four or five persons haggle and counter-propose ground rules, tape recorders and bulletin boards, the crews back at the fire stations become more dissatisfied — more convinced the city and its leaders care little for them and their problems — and less hopeful that even a signed contract will help them.

"THE NEGOTIATIONS are a waste of time," said one fire fighter who asked not to be identified. "We need binding arbitration."

The fire fighters are forbidden by state law from striking. Though they are unionized, their negotiation team is virtually powerless in dealing with the city.

City commissioners direct the city's team on what major points the city will or won't agree to and the commission must give final approval to any contract.

THE FIRE fighters feel the city commission is stacked against them. Their only relief, they say, will be when a new commission is elected. And the fire fighters feel that, with two incumbents just reelected last fall, is unlikely any time soon.

"The city's fighting us tooth and nail all the way," David Twyford, a former Winter Park fire fighter and paramedic, said. "Their aim is to give us as hard a time as they can, to make us spend money, to destroy the union."

Twyford resigned last week after six years in the department, partly for personal reasons, but also because he was disgusted with the city's attitude toward the negotiations and toward a paramedic program.

WINTER PARK'S paramedics, who have been trained to begin treatment with guidance from a doctor of heart attack or stroke or accident victims at the scene of the accident or illness, have been prevented from doing this because their drug box was removed from the city's rescue truck last November because of a lack of liability insurance.

Monday, however, the city reinstated the paramedic program when officials were informed of a \$1 million liability insurance policy authorized by former City Manager Robert D. Proctor.

TWYFORD'S resignation points up another problem in the department. The fire fighters feel the city is making no effort to keep its experienced people — that administrators would just as soon have "raw recruits" whom they can pay less.

Chief Edwin R. Ballard denies this. City employee relations director Rick Fitzgerald, who with labor attorney C. Robin Fawsett forms Winter Park's negotiation team, feels the fire fighters' stated morale problems are a bargaining ploy.

Ballard said he didn't think his department was suffering a serious morale problem. "Anytime you have contract negotiations you are going to have fluctuations in morale from day to day," Ballard said, "I'm sure the negotiations have an effect on the department but I don't think it is serious."

BALLARD said the union has been "dormant for many years" and added he couldn't judge what lasting effect the union would have on the operation of his department because many issues "have just recently come out." Ballard, who has served with the department for 27 years, has been chief only a month.

Ballard said men in his department, who have complained of a lack of overtime pay, work overtime on a voluntary basis only.

There has been no widespread abuse of sick leave or poor performance on the job, Fitzgerald said, and those are the true indicators of poor morale in a city department.

THE TALK of morale problems is nothing new. The fire fighters have complained for years of their long hours, lack of overtime pay and lack of parity pay with the police department.

But now there is a difference. "It's not so much low morale as it's hard feelings against the city, maybe bitterness," Clyde Hiner, a member of the fire fighters' negotiating team, said.

The fire fighters work 56-hour weeks — 24 hours on, 48 hours off. They have asked for that to be cut to 42-hour weeks, with 10- and 14-hour days interspersed with two days off (a plan used by the Orlando Fire Department), but the city refused.

AS AN ALTERNATE, they asked for time and a half pay for more than 56 hours. The fire fighters now get straight time overtime pay though they may work up to 80-hour weeks if they are



called in to work an extra shift.

Though the city has approved time and a half over 40 hours in a contract proposal for its blue collar workers, it refused overtime pay — even over 56 hours — for the fire fighters.

Many of the fire fighters say they must work at least one additional job on their off days, just to make ends meet. Ballard says this often is "by desire and not by necessity."

WINTER PARK fire fighters' starting salary is \$9,906. This compares with \$10,823 in Orlando; \$8,880 in Altamonte Springs; \$8,673 in Maitland, and \$8,049 in Daytona Beach.

There are other smaller irritants. Educational incentive pay, additional wages paid for completion of a college degree, was severely limited for the fire fighters by addendum No. 13 to the city's personnel manual.

No. 13, dated June 6, 1974, appeared in the manual in January 1975. Addendum No. 12 is dated Dec. 2, 1974. No. 13 affects only fire fighters hired after its effective date, and at least two fire fighters hired between June and December 1974, who thought they would be getting the additional \$520 a year, do not.

EDUCATIONAL incentive pay for police officers is \$960 a year, but Fitzgerald pointed out the police incentive pay is mandated by state law while the

fire fighters' is just "a little extra" the city gives them.

Fitzgerald said former City Manager Proctor explained the backdating by saying No. 13 was written down in late September or October 1974 but had been an "informal policy" for some months before that and "was backdated to coincide with the beginning of the incentive pay plan" — in June.

Even Ballard agrees the negotiations and the paramedic situation "have had some effect — I don't know to what degree" on the fire fighters.

BUT THE chief denied he had issued any orders that the fire fighters not talk to reporters, though several fire fighters said they had been warned by "superior officers" that complaining wasn't a good idea.

Meanwhile, the negotiations chug on, with neither side willing to predict when they will end. "The city won't budge," Hiner said. "We're not going to gain anything. We're concentrating to keep what we've already got."

Union President Michael Molthop says the bargaining sessions are not give and take but "strictly a take process. The articles we have now and the ones we've agreed on — we're no better off now than before we had a contract.

"THIS IS the worst department in the city to work for. We're continually getting stepped on."