

# Firefighters Want Freer Political Involvement

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The City of Winter Park and Winter Park Firefighters Local 1598 are both predicting a contract agreement within the next one or two bargaining sessions, but at least one issue the firefighters hoped to have resolved in the contract—that of political campaign activity—will probably not be included in the final agreement.

During Friday's negotiating session, union representatives asked the city to include in the contract a provision governing firefighters' political activity so that firefighters would not be subject to the current Winter Park Civil Service Code covering such activity.

"It's the feeling of the membership that they don't really like the restrictions put on them under the Civil Service Code," said fire department engineer Mike Molthop. Firefighters find that code unacceptable because it restricts their political activity during off-duty hours as well as on-duty hours, he said.

Union representatives proposed a provision patterned after City Manager David T. Harden's political activity policy stated in a memo to city general employees last month.

That policy prohibits political activity during duty hours, and the use by an employee in his official authority to coerce or attempt to influence a political body or interfere with a nomination or election.

City labor attorney Robin Fawsett told firefighter representatives that he would confer with city attorney Richard Trismen to see if the firefighters' contract could "circumvent the Civil Service Board."

However, Harden said Monday that firefighters were correct in their understanding that anything in the contract would supercede the Civil Service Code, but that he was "pretty sure the city commission feels that this is an issue between the firefighters and the Civil Service Board and they should try to settle it without getting the city commission and city administration involved in it."

Union attorney Joseph Eagen, present during negotiations Friday, said "the Civil Service Board's existing rule (on political activity) has got some problems. I'm of the opinion that the civil service regulation as it is written now is unlawful."

Eagen said he had been contacted by state officials on the illegality of the rule, but would not comment any further on why the state contacted him.

Eagen said later that according to Florida statutes, restriction of government employees' political activity should not keep employees from expressing their opinion in any political campaign.

Such a restriction by any local government would be a misdemeanor,

Eagen said, quoting the statutes.

Parts of the firefighters' contract which were agreed on in negotiations Friday included: a sick leave award system, in which firefighters who took less than 48 hours sick leave in a year would be rewarded with varying amounts of vacation time; three hours call-in pay which would guarantee a firefighter a minimum of three hours wages if he is called in to work outside his normal shift; a general agreement on the grievance procedure, arbitration and the management rights clause, and a general agreement on the duration of the contract—two years with a wage reopener clause.

The union also requested an eight per cent cost of living raise, but Fawsett called the union's request "an eleventh hour" kind of proposal because it was the first such increase the firefighters have proposed during months of negotiations and because the city's 1977-78 budget has already been approved.

"That just proves they have a sense of humor," city personnel director Rick Fitzgerald said about the wage increase request. "They brought that up so late—after 11 months. The money's all been spent."

The city and the firefighters union will meet again this week in what both hope will conclude the lengthy bargaining.

"We're really getting down to the wire now," Molthop said.