

City, fire union expect easier talks

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WINTER PARK — With last year's acrimonious contract negotiations still fresh in their minds, both the city and fire union representatives said they expect this year's negotiations to be different.

"I think both sides have learned from last year's process and I don't anticipate the adversity that we had," said assistant city manager John Litton. "I think that both sides want to get an agreement — if one can be reached — as soon as possible and not drag it out."

"From the preliminary meetings we've had so far, things do seem a lot more at ease," said union president Lt. Bobby Ferrell. "I think both of us want to get this resolved. The current contract, the one we didn't sign, was a status quo contract and we didn't gain anything from it."

The city has tried to establish a better relationship with the firefighters since the day last August that the city commission agreed to a contract that firefighters vehemently opposed and left unsigned, Litton said. "We followed the contract but we haven't been overbearing about it."

Ferrell said firefighters have been heartened by

seeing some efforts made to address their complaints. For example, their living conditions at the stations have been made better with new furniture and other improvements.

"The atmosphere has been somewhat better as far as being able to communicate with management. The new chief [Duane Mehl] is making a concerted effort . . .," Ferrell said.

Litton and union representatives for 27 firefighters and paramedics have met three times since mid-January. The first two sessions were spent establishing ground rules for future meetings, they said.

Ferrell said some issues that could not be agreed on last year will be taken up again. They include extra pay for firefighters who substitute as lieutenants, more promotional incentives, and a 14-day pay cycle instead of 28 days. The problem with the 28-day cycle, Ferrell said, is that firefighters who work overtime during that period but also take sick leave or vacation leave lose their overtime pay. A shorter pay cycle would solve that problem, he said.

Litton said some things the city took a hard stand on last year, such as pay and management's right to discipline and discharge, are still important.

However, he said, "My gut feeling right now is that we will be able to come to an agreement."