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First steps taken to boost morale of firefighters

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WINTER PARK — With firefighters and paramedics looking on, the city's civil service board took the first steps this week toward improving morale in the fire department.

The five-member board approved new promotions procedures aimed at relieving criticism that promotions are based primarily on favoritism.

The board also adopted a new method of scheduling examinations to shorten the length of time to fill vacancies.

Firefighters and paramedics cited problems with promotions and vacancies during the board's investigation of sinking morale in the 35-member fire department. Other complaints dealt with the fire department's lack of a training facility, a training officer to coordinate activities among firefighters and reserves, and separate restroom facilities for men and women.

The board's responsibilities include setting promotion procedures and dealing with grievances and complaints among police and fire personnel.

Because it has no budget of its own, board members recommended that the city commission consider creating the job of training officer as well as building separate restrooms. The city already is looking for a site for a training facility.

Board members, however, routed complaints of low pay scales and inadequate sick leave directly to commissioners. No date has been set for a commission discussion of the complaints.

The department's eight reserve firefighters had complained that they weren't being called often enough to fight fires. Board members said they sympathized with the reserves, but said the number of fire calls had greatly diminished because of the city's successful fire prevention program.

Jim Moreland, chairman of the civil service board, said there has been no change in the reserve program although rescue calls now outnumber fire calls.

City commissioners need to decide whether the fire department should have reserves with emergency medical training or with firefighting experience, Moreland said.

One of the fire department's two paramedics said Tuesday's action by the civil service board "hit some of the strong points" but is only a step toward resolving the complaints.

The fire department recently lost four of its six paramedics to other jobs or to resignations. As a result, the two remaining paramedics are working 48-hour shifts with only 24 hours off.

"The city should get more people hired here so they won't burn out the people they got," said the paramedic, who asked not to be identified. "A paramedic is only supposed to last about five years."

Fire Chief Sid Ballou said two paramedics will be hired immediately, a third within the next three weeks and a fourth by August.

One firefighter, who also asked to remain anonymous, said firefighters resented what he called the "iron fist" approach of the fire chief and assistant fire chief.

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