

Winter Park prepares for hazardous spill

By Mark Andrews

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

WINTER PARK — Suppose a freight train derailed at the Morse Boulevard crossing, and a pressurized tank car containing liquefied petroleum gas were punctured.

The fireball could incinerate half of Central Park while flying chunks of jagged steel crashed into stores along Park Avenue.

A gruesome thought, to be sure. But members of the Winter Park Fire Department's hazardous materials unit have to think about such tragedies — especially because at least 10 freight trains pass through the center of town each day.

The unit does not have a van to carry the equipment it would use to clean up toxic spills and patch leaking tankers. But public safety director Ray Beary said he expects to have a vehicle donated, outfitted

and on the road soon.

Ten city firefighters have been trained to deal with spills of hazardous materials, and special equipment has been purchased, including a gas detector, protective suits and firefighting foam. The city also has a computer program with information on 1,200 hazardous materials.

But until the city has a van — like the ones Maitland, Orlando, Altamonte Springs and Orange County have — the training and special gear will do little good. The city commission last year told Beary to draft a plan for dealing with spills of hazardous materials, but budgeted no money to buy a van.

Fire Lt. Jim Knackert, who heads the hazardous materials unit, has written the plan that outlines how the city would deal with an overturned gasoline tanker truck, a train wreck or similar incident that involved the release of toxic substances.

The first step, he said, would be to determine if residents and businesses needed to be evacuated. If

the potential existed for fire or an explosion, or if poisonous gases had been released, moving people would be the fire department's top priority, he said.

Next, the unit would identify the toxic substance released. If a gasoline tanker truck or railroad car overturned, that task would not be too difficult. But many other trucks carry dangerous materials that are not identified on the outside, said fire department spokesman Chip Gaines.

"We've got a ton of stuff coming through here and we don't know what it is," Beary said. If the driver is dead or incapacitated, identifying the substance could pose a problem.

Train cars, however, are supposed to have their contents marked. CSX Transportation Inc. cars routinely carry LP gas, explosives, ammonia and acid, Gaines said. But the railroad does not notify the city when materials requiring unusual precautions are being carried on its trains. Their speed through cities is restricted to 35 mph.

If the spill were a big one, or a fire were raging out of control, the city would not hesitate to call other fire departments for help, Knackert said. Local governments routinely help each other in big emergencies.

Fortunately, the city has never experienced a life-threatening situation more serious than an apartment fire. Most spills of dangerous substances for which the fire department is called involve chlorine leaks at swimming pools.

The environment is another key concern. The hazardous materials unit would try to prevent toxic materials from getting into lakes or storm drains.

The city plans to conduct at least two mock disasters next fall to help train firefighters and other emergency personnel how to respond. One, Beary said, will be a rather small spill — the kind the city's unit could mop up on its own.

But the other one will be a monster. Beary said conditions will be set up to simulate a train wreck in which the Lyman Avenue fire station, next to the railroad tracks, and the city's communications center in the basement of the police department next door are knocked out of service.

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Fire Department
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