

Firefighters' pay is hot issue

By Sherri M. Owens

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

WINTER PARK — In the recent weeks after wildfires blazed through several Florida communities, firefighters have received lots of praise and pats on the back.

But in Winter Park, firefighters say praise is one thing — pay is another.

The firefighters' union and the city have been negotiating a new contract since September. Now, they are at a standstill.

Firefighters are demanding higher salaries and better benefits — even if it means raising taxes.

"The city is bricking Park Avenue," said Joe Powell, an engineer-paramedic who has been with the Fire Department for 15 years. "They spent \$8 million to buy a golf course . . . Where is the money for the firefighters? We're saying raise the millage rate if that's what needs to be done."

Orlando Sentinel 7/26/98
“They spent \$8 million to buy a golf course . . . Where is the money for the firefighters?”

— Joe Powell

Winter Park engineer-paramedic

Powell is president of the Winter Park Professional Firefighters Local 1598.

Assistant City Manager Randy Knight agreed the starting pay of \$21,887 is low, but he said Winter Park firefighters move quickly to higher levels of pay, sometimes 15 percent in the first year of employment.

He said the city had offered a new starting salary of \$24,613, along with other benefits. Last week, the union rejected the offer.

Firefighters have been working without a contract since October, when the old one expired, Powell said. However, they received 2 percent across-the-board raises this year, as did other city employees, and they also received merit step increases for a total of 4½ percent to 7 percent each.

The city and the union conducted a Pay and Benefits Study in February. It compared Winter Park's fire department with nine others based on location and services.

The study showed Winter Park's starting base salary ranked ninth out of the 10.

The other departments were in Altamonte Springs, Casselberry, Maitland, Ocoee, Orange County, Orlando, Oviedo, Sanford and Seminole County.

Orlando topped the list with a starting base pay of \$30,592; Casselberry was at the bottom with a starting base salary of \$21,595.

Please see **SALARY, K-4**

Starting pay

Winter Park and the Winter Park Professional Firefighters Local 1598 compared minimum starting salaries for firefighter/emergency medical technicians, an entry position, in 10 local fire departments.

The comparison, as shown below, does not include holiday differential pay.

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|----------------------|----------|
| 1. Orlando | \$30,592 |
| 2. Seminole | 27,765 |
| 3. Orange County | 27,739 |
| 4. Sanford | 24,607 |
| 5. Oviedo | 24,197 |
| 6. Altamonte Springs | 24,081 |
| 7. Ocoee | 23,753 |
| 8. Maitland | 21,949 |
| 9. Winter Park | 21,887 |
| 10. Casselberry | 21,595 |

Source: City of Winter Park Fire-Rescue Joint Pay & Benefits Study, February '98

Union proposal asked for starting salary of \$29,347

Orlando Sentinel 7/26/98

SALARY from K-1

The offer the union turned down last week would have ranked Winter Park fourth instead of ninth, behind Orlando, Orange County and Seminole County. It would have been the highest-paid agency among the small cities, Knight said. But the union had asked for a benefits package that included a starting salary of \$29,347, which would have ranked it third. The city said no way. "That package would have cost taxpayers \$2 million a year," Knight said.

City commissioners will tentatively vote on the tax rate Tuesday. Knight could not say whether they will increase the rate.

The tax rate in Winter Park is

3.89 mills, or \$3.89 per \$1,000 of taxable property value. At that rate, the owner of a \$200,000 home with a \$25,000 homestead exemption pays about \$680 in city taxes.

The tax rate dropped slightly this year from 3.99 mills, where it had been since 1990, Knight said.

One firefighter, who asked that his name not be used for fear of retribution, said the pay is so low in Winter Park that in addition to the 56 hours a week he is on duty at the fire station, he also works 24 hours a week at a second job.

His wife works part time. He said his two children qualify for a government paid pre-kindergarten and free school lunch.

If the union and the city cannot reach an agreement, a hearing officer will make a ruling.