

Fire Dept Requests Restructure

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A proposal to restructure the Winter Park Fire Department that city staff says will improve the department's firefighting capabilities has been put on hold until it can be reviewed by the city's new fire chief and new assistant city manager/personnel director.

The proposal was tabled at the last city commission meeting after some commissioners said they were concerned the plan was just a way to promote fire department employees.

City Commissioner Jerome J. Donnelly moved that the proposal be tabled until the city's new personnel manager and assistant city manager, John Litton, reviews it and gives his recommendation. Litton will join the city staff on June 18.

The city announced Friday that Fire Chief Edwin Ballard, who made the restructuring proposal to the city commission last month, is retiring after 28 years with the department and two and half years as chief. City Manager David T. Harden said the retirement was expected and that Ballard had set the date a month ago.

Harden said he expects to promote someone from within the department to the position of chief. Sid Ballou, assistant chief/training officer, will be acting chief until the new chief is appointed.

Ballard told the city commission at a May 22 work session that the fire department needs to be restructured to give the captain on duty greater flexibility to be at the scene of a fire anywhere in the city.

Under the present structure, he said, the captain can only be present at fires on the west side of the city. The lieutenant on duty at Fire Station 2 is in command of fires on the east side.

Harden told the commission that the presence of a captain is important at structural fires because -- other than the chief -- a captain has the most training and experience in the department.

Structures on the east side that

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would need a captain's expertise in the event of a fire include two elementary schools, Winter Park High School, Winter Park Memorial Hospital, Winter Park Towers and Americana Nursing Home, Harden said.

The proposed restructuring would promote three engineers to lieutenants but would not change the total number of fire department employees. The \$1,800 cost of the change would be absorbed by the department's budget, Ballard said.

The restructuring plan would put a lieutenant in charge of the annex station at the city garage on the west side. Presently, that station has one engineer and one firefighter and no officer on duty, and therefore does not have first response capability.

Under the present structure, the captain is the only officer on duty for both the main downtown station and the annex station. Therefore, Ballard said, the captain cannot respond even to major fires on the east side of the city because that would leave the west side with no officer in command.

Commissioner Jerome J. Donnelly

wondered whether the plan was just a way to promote someone. "We don't want to have top-heavy departments," he said.

Donnelly argued that the annex facility is "not a station," but was set up as a backup if a fire occurred on the west side when a train was on the tracks.

"It's immaterial to me what you call it," Ballard replied, repeating that the west side of the city needs an officer on duty if the captain answers a call on the east side. Ballard said he wanted a captain on the scene of all structural fires in the city.

Responding to a comment by Donnelly that the present system "seems to be working quite well right now," Ballard warned that the city was "gambling against the percentages." The fire chief also said the city's fire insurance rating may be affected because at the last rating done several years ago the city was told it would need additional personnel and today the department has less personnel.

Commissioner Harold Roberts

asked why engineers would have to be given a new title of lieutenant and \$600 more a year if they are "qualified to do the job now?" Ballard responded that the promotion was due the engineers because they would increase their responsibilities and learn new methods at the downtown fire station.

City Manager Harden said Monday that he disagreed with the feeling expressed by some commissioners that the restructuring was just a way to promote employees.

Harden said the restructuring has three purposes:

- to enable the annex fire station to have a first response capability -- that is, to be the first unit to respond to a fire scene. It does not now have that capability;
- to allow lieutenants to rotate shifts between the Lakemont Avenue station and the annex station to familiarize them with the west side of town and main station;
- to enable the captain, the most experienced man on duty other than the chief, to respond to major fires on the east side.