

Gripes spur poll of firefighters in Winter Park

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WINTER PARK — Continuing complaints about poor morale in the fire department prompted the city's civil service board this week to call for a poll of the 45-member department to determine the extent of employee dissatisfaction.

Last year, complaints about poor morale, favoritism in promotions and lengthy vacancies prompted an investigation by the board and led to adoption of a new promotions procedure and speedier testing to fill vacancies.

But some board members expressed dismay Tuesday that complaints about morale continue to surface in exit interviews with retiring employees. In the most recent interview, retiring engineer Joseph Tetreault told board members that department morale was lower than ever and said the problems were caused by management.

The seven-member civil service board is responsible for setting promotion procedures and dealing with grievances and complaints among police and fire personnel. Five members are appointed by the city commission and the fire and police departments each elect a representative.

The board voted unanimously to have board members Richard Proctor Jr. and Rusty Scalla, a paramedic, conduct a confidential poll of the department to find out the extent of fire department dissatisfaction.

Tetreault, a 26-year veteran of the department, charged that favoritism dominates the promotion process in the fire department. He also complained about poorly outlined job descriptions, lack of training, ineffective employee evaluations and lack of ranking positions for paramedics who handle a high percentage of calls. Tetreault cited high turnover of 11 positions in 1982 as an indication of the problem.

Fire Chief Sid Ballou said after the meeting that

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the criticism was "a rehash of some old problems" but that progress had been made in correcting them. Disagreeing with Tetreault's turnover figures, Ballou said 77 percent of the people who were members of the department when he became chief in 1979 are still with the department.

In a discussion of Tetreault's interview Tuesday, board members agreed that complaints about morale seemed to center on questions about the promotion process and employee evaluations.

Ballou told board members that he had not been as "forceful" with evaluations because he was "trying not to

hurt people's feelings," but that he had tried to make his evaluations more specific in the past year.

Board member Proctor, who interviewed Tetreault, defended Ballou for trying to correct past problems and said the new promotion policy was working.

Tetreault's comment that the city manager, city commissioners and civil service board members should visit the station periodically to talk to firefighters "may be a bigger key than we're all aware of," Proctor said. Such visits would be a positive step appreciated by firefighters, he said.

Civil service board member Ann Hamilton voiced frustration at the continuing number of complaints. She said the board needed to know what definite steps would be taken by fire department management and urged

that a poll be taken.

The city's policy of granting employees raises only on the basis of merit may be a factor in dissatisfaction with employee evaluations, said board member Ken Searce. The system puts money pressures on the evaluation process because supervisors use evaluations to justify pay increases instead of to indicate who is best suited for promotion, he said.

Police Chief Ray Beary criticized the city's policy of allotting enough money for an average of 4 percent in merit increases to cover a range of zero to 7 percent in increases. Beary he said it restricts the number of employees who can get the maximum 7 percent raise.

The board voted to recommend that the city provide enough money to correct that problem.

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