

City firefighter resigns in policy fight with chief

By Yvonne C.T. Vassel

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

WINTER PARK — Firefighter Daniel Bennett has quit his job with the city fire department, just two weeks after he was nearly fired for a policy dispute with the fire chief.

Tuesday will be his last day.

Earlier this month Bennett, 27, appeared before the city's civil service board and asked members to review a fire department policy that regulates the amount of time firefighters can take off for college classes.

The policy states firefighters must notify their supervisors if they wish to take classes that will interrupt their regular scheduled shift. Bennett is in his final semester at University of Central Florida, where he is working on a degree in psychology. To attend daytime classes three days a week he had been taking vacation time off 12 hours at a time.

"I attend classes Monday, Wednesday and Friday for four hours and Thursday night for three hours," Bennett said. "School conflicts with the fire department for approximately four days a month so I was asking for days off only about a couple days each month."

On Jan. 18 and again on Jan. 21 he took 12 hours off his shift to attend classes. After being questioned by his shift commander, Bennett met with Fire Chief Mike Molthrop and agreed to resign instead of having a reprimand placed on his record. Later he decided not to quit and took the issue to the civil service board.

"I just did it for the guys," Bennett said Tuesday. "When he [Molthrop] gave me the ultimatum of staying with a bad record or resigning I just thought that was unfair with the service I had given the city." He has been on the job for three years.

Molthrop said Bennett did not tell him of his change of heart and when he did not submit the letter of resignation, the chief recommended that he be fired. However, after the civil service hearing and further discussions, the chief changed his mind about firing Bennett. The civil service board did not discuss the issue at its Feb. 5 meeting. Members plan to talk about it next month.

Bennett returned to work Feb. 8 and on Feb. 11 submitted a request for time off in small increments. In the meantime, Molthrop said he notified shift commanders not to approve vacation time off unless it was for at least 24 hours at a time. Exceptions would be made in cases of dire need, he said.

Molthrop said he is willing to recommend changes in the policy if there are others in the department in the same situation as Bennett. He said he has asked his supervisors to review the policy with firefighters and tell him about any problem areas. Molthrop said he will ask the civil service board to go over the policy at its March 5 meeting.

The purpose of the policy is to maintain the department's minimum staffing without routinely asking people to work overtime, he said.

Bennett said he works part-time as a salesman and hopes to get a full-time sales job after he graduates.

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