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Firefighters' poll notes gripes about raises, recognition

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OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

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WINTER PARK — Lack of recognition and the manner in which pay raises are given were major complaints of firefighters polled recently by the Civil Service Board.

Firefighters also griped about favoritism in promotions, inconsistent discipline and procedures, management's failure to accept criticism, and the lack of a ranking officer to run the emergency medi-

cal services program, according to a written report on the poll.

The Civil Service Board in a special meeting Monday reviewed the results of the poll.

The board asked for the poll to get more information about complaints that had surfaced in exit interviews with several employees. Board member Ken Scearce said he thought the major purpose of the poll was to make the fire chief aware of how the men perceive problems in the department.

The board on Monday also discussed a summary of an exit interview with former fire department em-

ployee Ed Zachary. He criticized the board for a lack of awareness of departmental matters and criticized fire department management for favoritism in promotions, pay increases and management decisions.

Acknowledging they had little control over city commission policy on granting employee raises or paying for a new officer position, board members agreed better communication and improvements in some methods of operation may solve other morale problems.

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They asked Fire Chief Sid Ballou to:

- Make monthly written reports to the board on changes taking place, morale problems, budget requests and department priorities to keep the board informed of developments before they build into major problems.

- Advise board member Rusty Scalla, a fire department paramedic, when employees quit or retire so that Scalla can find out if the employees want exit interviews to discuss why they left.

- Encourage employees unsuccessful in seeking a promotion to talk to him about the reasons they were not promoted.

Ballou and Assistant Chief Mike Molthop defended management actions at the meeting. Ballou said promotions are decided "by committee," a group consisting of him and three shift commanders. He said he could remember no cases in which his recommendation for promotion differed from those of shift commanders in the

group.

In a memo commenting on Zachary's charges of favoritism, Ballou acknowledged the charge had been discussed by the Civil Service Board several times. "I have made considerable effort to remove my personal feelings but as with all people, some personal feeling will be there."

Molthop said Tuesday he did not understand why complaints about fire department morale keep surfacing.

Some problems are ones that affect individuals or a small group, or are claims that cannot be substantiated, he noted. "We do the best we can for the entire department," he said. "There are going to be people who are unhappy with some of those decisions."

Molthop said he and Ballou could do nothing about merit increases which are "mandated by city hall."

City commissioners decided two years ago to do away with across-the-board and automatic cost-of-living pay raises, which sometimes occurred twice a year in addition to yearly merit increases. They instituted merit increases based on employee evalu-

ations.

The change to a once-yearly raise based solely on merit left some city employees feeling that something was being taken away from them, said John Litton, city personnel director.

Litton defended the current city pay plan as one that is competitive and adequate for the jobs performed. "No pay plan is going to satisfy everyone."

This year the city commission approved merit raises of 0 to 5 percent, with 4 percent budgeted for each employee. Firefighters were critical of the plan because it limits the number of maximum raises. Department heads cannot give a maximum 5 percent raise to an employee unless another employee gets a 3 percent raise, which firefighters said barely dents cost-of-living increases.

But Litton said cost-of-living increased by less than 4 percent last year, when the city allocated raises up to 7 percent and enough for each employee to get a 6 percent raise. The inflation rate is even lower this year, he said.

A decision to raise taxes to give higher raises is "a political decision" that city commissioners must make, Litton said.