

City of W. P.
Fire Department

Fire department morale on mend

□ A new chief and new equipment have helped ease animosity and turn around Winter Park's troubled agency.
By Ines Davis Parrish

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

WINTER PARK — A few years ago, the Winter Park Fire Department was a troubled agency, dogged by sexual harassment complaints, porno flicks being shown at the station and spats with the city manager.

Now, firefighters say, those headline-grabbing days are behind them. "Morale is better than I've seen it in a while," said engineer-firefighter Brian Dean, an 11-year veteran of the department.

Firefighters give much of the credit for the department's turnaround to the new top commanders, Chief Dennis Sargent and his deputy, Jim White. The arrival of Sargent came on board 18 months ago, and, with White, began making sweeping changes.

"No one [from the department] wanted to be chief here when I was hired. That's

not a good sign," Sargent said. A man who has seen plenty of himself in past jobs, Sargent said he arrived there "were a lot of politics, no communication and a lot of apprehension."

Among the problems was animosity between the firefighters and City Manager Tony Barrett, a sexual harassment allegation by a female firefighter against Police Chief Jim Younger — he was cleared of any wrongdoing — and claims by firefighter Judy Manor that there was on-going sexual harassment in the department.

An investigation after last year's complaint about firefighters watching X-rated movies at the stations concluded the practice was minimal and sporadic. City officials set up guidelines to prohibit the videos, as well devising as a sexual harassment policy.

Younger, who did a stint last year as public safety director over the department before Sargent was hired, found several areas of concern, including lack of training, no discipline and poor equipment.

Younger began making some of the changes that have helped the department.

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Equipment, better training help morale

Orlando Sentinel

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ment, such as requiring physical and medical fitness tests, a mandatory dress code and better training.

"Equipment-wise, we were in bad shape," Sargent said.

Since Sargent was hired, the department has spent more than \$450,000 to buy a lightweight ladder truck to replace an old platform truck, buy a new rescue unit

and refurbish a pumper firetruck.

Sargent also has replaced the chiefs' vehicles with lightweight sports utility trucks that have better emergency capabilities.

In addition to the new equipment, Sargent has had new logos and new colors painted on the equipment to shed a "generic" image the department suffered from.

A new standard operating procedure to better define the chain of

command and how emergencies will be handled was developed to make the department more efficient, Sargent said.

"There's a new esprit de corps here," Sargent said.

Mayor Gary Brewer, who served on the commission 11 years before taking the mayor's post this year, agreed morale has improved.

Brewer wants to extend the olive branch to firefighters, who he said have felt ostracized by top city officials for various reasons, including friction caused when the department formed a union.

"I hope the day comes when they don't need a union," Brewer said.

While everyone agrees there have been significant improvements, some problems remain.

Firefighter union President Pat McCabe said improvements in pay and retirement plans still are needed. Firefighters want a more specific pay plan to outline salary increases, and a more equitable pension plan.

Also, the attitude from city management remains somewhat negative, McCabe said. He frets about

City Manager Tony Barrett's comment that he wishes the fire department could be half as good as the police department.

Barrett makes no apology for saying that.

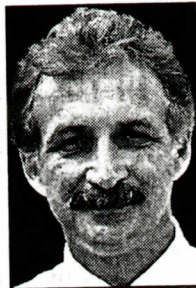
"We have an excellent police department," he said.

"I don't have any animosity toward the firefighters ... but I'm the bad guy in this situation whatever I say or do."

Barrett said firefighters want to be treated differently than other employees, and he will not do that. And, he said, "We've been giving pay increases all along when no one else has."

Barrett said the city has made great strides in pay as well as pension plans for public safety employees. "Our pay is right where it should be."

Despite the kinks, firefighters recently signed a three-year contract with the city, the longest yet. McCabe and others are hopeful that with the improved communications between city leaders and the fire department, things will continue to improve.



Sargent