

City of Winter Park
Fire Department
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Reserve firefighters may be cut out

Cost, response time cited as reasons to eliminate Winter Park program

By Geri Throne

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

WINTER PARK — Reserve firefighters are a city tradition that should be ended, city commissioners agreed Friday.

"The reserve fire department is a thing of the past. We're holding on to something that has very little benefit to the city," said Commissioner Gary Brewer during a budget workshop.

Fire Chief Sid Ballou recommended against putting money in the budget

for reserve firefighters because the program is expensive to administer and reserves often do not show up at fires.

Reserves are paid \$4 to \$5 an hour. The fire department budgeted \$20,000 last year for 10 reserve positions but only had nine reserves and spent less than \$10,000, said Ballou, who said he favored keeping an unpaid reserve squad.

Unlike cities such as Apopka, Winter Park has few residents who work in the city and are available to fight fires, said City Manager David Hard-

en. He said reserves were less enthusiastic about the job because of improved response time and training of full-time firefighters. By the time reserves arrive, the fire is out and all that is left is cleanup, he said.

Mayor Hope Strong Jr. and Commissioner Dave Johnston agreed with Brewer that the program should be cut from the 1984 budget. Commissioners Tom Ivey and David Currie were out of town.

In other budget decisions, commissioners:

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■ Dropped a proposal for a new shift schedule for firefighters.

■ Directed city staff members to meet with Orange County to discuss a proposal for the city to lease the county fire station on Howell Branch Road.

■ Expressed interest in doing away with rescue service fees, but put off a decision until more commissioners were present.

The city now charges fees ranging from \$20 to \$35 for first-aid services, advanced life support and transportation to a hospital. Ballou said he would support a charge for transportation but found it "embarrassing" to charge for rescue calls such as someone tripping on a city sidewalk.

The collection rate for rescue billings is only 40 percent, according to city records.

Ballou, who earlier supported a plan to change the fire department work schedule from 24 hours on, 48 hours off, to a 10-hour shift and a 14-hour night shift, said he changed his mind after talking to his staff. The new shift would "pull the plug" on department morale and would cause firefighters to leave, he said.

Fire department employees know they are "under scrutiny and have to be more productive," said Ballou. "There has been a marked improve-

ment in production."

Commissioners called for more meetings with Orange County to discuss a plan to contract with the county to operate Station 64 on Howell Branch Road.

City response time from the Lakemont Avenue station to the remote Howell Branch area is eight to 10 minutes, so the city relies on the county's Howell Branch station to provide first response to the area, said Ballou.

There are 49 structures in city limits off Howell Branch Road and additional high density projects are planned for the Temple Trail area.

But Ballou said Station 64 is low priority for the county and firefighters there are often out on county calls because it covers such a wide area.

"We're not providing the protection we should there in view of the planned development of that area," he said.

Ballou recommended the city operate the station for the county and staff it with three firefighters. Harden said the city had never reached an agreement with the county on how much the city would spend for such an agreement, but he estimated it would be from \$50,000 to \$70,000.



Ballou