

# A sinking morale

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## Civil service board investigating firefighters' complaints

By SHARON CARRASCO

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WINTER PARK — Complaints by firefighters and paramedics about recurring problems and sinking morale has spurred an investigation into the fire department that will be reviewed by the city's civil service board Tuesday.

Ken Searce, the board's chief examiner who led the investigation, plans to make recommendations on complaints that include having no training facilities, poor maintenance of fire stations and too many "nitpicking" rules.

Fire personnel also have complained about having no separate bathroom facilities for men and

women, poor relations with chiefs, and policies that banned the morning shift from cooking breakfast.

Jim Moreland, chairman of the civil service board, said the 46 complaints from fire personnel fall into five categories: internal policies, training, city policies, equipment needs and personnel relations.

The five-member civil service board is responsible for setting promotion procedures and dealing with grievances and complaints among police and fire personnel.

"I can't say whether there's a bad morale problem," Searce

said. "We have had some good comments about the department, too. We will try to work out something that will make everybody happy and improve the department," Searce said.

Asked what prompted the investigation, Moreland said:

"If you get enough questions directed at a particular individual or enough complaints about the same problem or if eight guys say there's a morale problem, then you figure there's a morale problem. You try to head it off before there's a major confrontation."

Bad morale adversely affects

Please see MORALE, 10

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## MORALE

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From 1

job performance and is a hazard in a lifesaving profession, like firefighting and emergency medicine, he said.

Searce said the fire department in recent years has made "good advances" with its new rescue-pumper trucks and other equipment.

But with additional administrative responsibilities and paperwork, personal contact between the chiefs and the men has dwindled, Searce said.

"Both the assistant fire chief and chief told me they were buried in paperwork," Searce said. "If you take two department heads from contact with their men and delegate everything, you will have bad feelings."

Fire Chief Sid Ballou said he was aware of some morale problems in the department and conceded some of the complaints were justified.

The fire department now has no place for training and a location is a real necessity, Ballou said. There hasn't been a training officer to coordinate training activities since 1977, he said.

"We have needed manpower and equipment," said Ballou, chief for three years. "Your priorities are so

far split and in the meantime, you have to train people."

Last fall, the city granted Ballou's request for three firefighters and to increase paramedic incentive pay to \$3,000 to be competitive with surrounding areas.

Since he became chief, Ballou said, the fire department has received a \$221,000 tower truck and two new prototype fire trucks that combine rescue and fire operations.

Reserves have complained that they aren't called out often enough for fires. Ballou said, however, that the city has relatively few calls because of the fire prevention program.

"I wish there were more fires," Ballou said. "It's good for morale. You train, train, train and get ready and you never do it."

Another complaint charged there is little or no appreciation by the chiefs when fire personnel perform above and beyond the call of duty.

"The younger guys need that emotional support for a good job," Ballou said. "They do an excellent job 99 percent of the time. They do deserve it but they don't always get it."