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City hopes to dampen fire department blazes

Winter Park City Manager David Harden is looking to remedy an "irritation" in the Winter Park Fire Department.

The study by Harden is the result of two letters received by the city disputing practices in the department in both the reserve and full-time capacities.

"There's nothing really major wrong," Harden said Tuesday. "What we're looking at is a lot of minor problems that when added up contribute to some irritation in the department. We're looking to resolve those problems."

Former firefighter Derrick New, who left the city to become an Orange County fireman, has complained to city officials of a department "black list" for disciplinary purposes.

New said he didn't have an exit interview when he left the department last year because he said it would be used to "intimidate" him. The Plymouth resident also complained of discipline for refusal to work a double shift and of the department's promotional policies.

Fire Chief Sid Ballou, a 10-year Winter Park veteran, was candid in his assessment of New's complaints. "Sure, it's human nature to have a black list--everybody has one. If somebody washes my car and does a good job, I'm going to think more of him than the guy who does a sloppy job. But there's not a black list used for disciplinary

purposes," he explained.

Ballou also said he doesn't "deny" the discipline when New was asked to work overtime for security at the Winter Park sinkhole. "Sometimes justice is quick," the fire chief pointed out but added that he regretted the actions now.

Harden said as a result of New's letter, he and Ballou have discussed the shifting of disciplinary action now handled by the assistant fire chief to the captain in charge of each shift.

The city manager also said the city's Civil Service Board will be asked to study the promotional policies within the department.

At the same time, Harden is looking into other problems within the department, such as the lack of separate restroom facilities for male and female firefighters, which he said "causes a problem."

The reserve program has also come under fire. Reserve Robert W. Hines resigned effective

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Sid Ballou

Fire

(Cont. from pg. 1)

Monday, citing inadequate training sessions and the lack of fire calls made by the reserves.

"For more than the past year the quality of the training sessions has greatly diminished and the number of fires we have been called out on has been cut drastically," Hines said in his letter to Ballou and Harden.

Hines, who started with the department in 1956, said that 'on duty training' consists "mainly of watching TV" and that "volunteer call out to fires has dwindled down to one or maybe two per month."

Ballou, chief for 2½ years, said he has "no intention to refute his (Hines') statements." "There are some bonafide problems in the reserve program that need attention," he commented. "There are several reserves who support Hines' feelings."

Until October of last year, reserves were paid \$6 per hour to respond to calls. But due to morale problems with the city's full-time firemen, their pay was cut to that of a beginning full-time fireman--\$4, with incentive increases for completing state training programs.

With the decrease in hourly pay, the reserves are now only sent out on calls "when they are needed," said Ballou. Harden, who has met with the reserves to hear their gripes, explained that the number of reserve calls were curtailed because "it was a waste of the city's money." The city manager explained that in the past, reserves were "called to everything, even false alarms."

"I can understand their financial situation," Ballou added explaining that the reserves are only being called out once or twice a month. "But

it's up to the shift commander whether to call out the reserves," he pointed out.

Ballou also agreed with Hines' complaints concerning the Thursday night training sessions. "The Thursday night training is probably not as productive as it could be," he stated, "I know from personal experience, having conducted them for three years."

"But guys have been at the station since 7 a.m. and they're tired and they don't really want to lay out hose for the training. The men are weary and not very gung ho," the fire chief pointed out. "It's a situation not easily resolved, it's kind of a give-and-take situation between both sides."

Civil Service Board chairman Jim Moreland had another view of the situation. "It's difficult to have training sessions when nobody shows up. At the most recent one, only three of nine reserves showed up," he commented.

Moreland added that the reserve problem is not just isolated in the fire department. "All departments have problems when you have more paid than volunteer workers. The problem is, there is no control over the volunteers," he said.

The Winter Park attorney said a report on the reserve problem will be presented at the March 2 Civil Service Board meeting. "I don't think we'll ever have a solution to the problem. We can help remedy the problem, but if we ever come up with a solution, we could sell it like hotcakes," he added.

But Ballou was hopeful that the problems could be resolved. "I talked yesterday to a chief in a similar situation who has a successful reserve program," he said. "I want to find out what he's doing right, because I'm obviously not doing it."