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— Bill Richardson
district fire chief



Smoking ban draws doubts

Some firefighters like idea but don't think it's feasible

By DON STEWART
Tribune Writer

Some firefighters say a proposed ban on hiring Tulsa firemen who smoke is a "tremendous idea," but they doubt whether the city can effectively prohibit people already on the payroll from lighting up.

"If they get by with taking cigarettes away, what are they going to do next?" said Bill Stephens, a fireman at the Central Station, 411 S. Frankfort Ave.

Stephens, who does not smoke, and other firefighters said a Safety and Health Committee recommendation that the city hire only non-smoking firemen was a "tremendous" idea.

But, they doubted whether the city had the right to mandate a no-smoking policy among current firefighters,

or whether such a ban would be effective.

Monday, the committee recommended the city take the action because of health, safety and economic reasons.

"The effects of smoking (among firefighters filing Workers' Compensation claims against the city) exceeded any contribution made by exposure to fumes, smokes and gases during fire attendances by smokers," Dr. Robert Mahaffey, a city Medical Department physician told the committee.

Mahaffey said the city last year spent \$618,577 in Workers' Compensation settlements for lung injuries of Tulsa firefighters. Over 90 percent of the settlements involved firefighters who smoke, he said.

"The only way to do it (find non-smoking firefighters) is with new

hires," said Capt. Don Grant. "I don't smoke and it doesn't bother me if other people do (on the job). You just have to have an educational program for the people who are here."

"You have to grandfather it in. You can't change in mid-stream."

District Chief Bill Richardson, whose 13 men are among 747 firefighters who will be affected by a smoking ban, lit a cigarette and criticized the proposal.

"I don't think it's right. I don't think these (Workers' Compensation) cases are coming from smoking," Richardson said. "The mandatory air mask is the best thing they have done (for firefighters' health), but the only thing that's going to stop people from smoking is to increase the cost of cigarettes."

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Several firefighters asked why the proposed no-smoking ban was not extended to all city workers.

"We all know it's bad for you," Grant said. "It's a proven fact that smoking cuts down on your athletic ability. The police department has to chase criminals all the time. Aren't they concerned about the health of the police department?"

With their 24-hours on-duty, 72-hours off-duty schedule, firefighters tend to be non-judgmental about each other's habits, several said.

"You can't be too picky working with somebody 24 hours a day," Stephens said.

Five of 13 firefighters at the Central Station Tuesday said they smoke. Another two chew tobacco, Bean said.

"If they are concerned about our health, they should be concerned about all aspects of it," Bean said. "How about the chewers? Firefighters don't care for hard and fast rules. You have to stroke 'em a little."

Since the fire station is a public building, the city could ban smoking on the premises, Bean said. Smoking is now permitted in designated areas but not in or near

the trucks, he said.

Richardson, who says he has been a smoker and a firefighter for 25 years and missed only one day to illness, said an outright ban is unlikely.

"They'll probably just have smoking areas," he said.

Presently, 38 percent of Tulsa firefighters smoke, said Preston Whitson, city personnel director. An education program aimed at persuading them to stop should be instituted, he said.

Mahaffey and Richard Bingham, department loss control manager, said fire departments in Wichita, Kan., and Alexandria, Va., among others, have banned smoking by firefighters. The reasons for the bans, they said, are:

- Smokers, medical and insurance studies have found, are less physically fit than non-smokers.

- 10 percent of all medical costs annually are due to smoking-related disorders.

- Smokers have an accident rate twice that of non-smokers.

- And, smokers use the health care system 50 percent more than non-smokers.

Tom Baker, president of the Firefighters Union, said the union favors educational programs to persuade people to stop smoking.

Baker said the committee's proposal to hire only non-smokers and to discipline those who start smoking after they are hired could be discussed in arbitration.

Mayor Terry Young directed Whitson and Baker to draft a memorandum on the smoking proposals.

The proposals then would be incorporated into the next union contract, subject to the bargaining process, Baker said.

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