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CIRCULATION

Sunday, September 4, 2005

Victorville fire course sparks investigation City attorney will look into financial aspects of class taught by Fire Chief John Becker

By MIGUEL GONZALEZ/Staff Writer

VICTORVILLE — The chief of the Victorville Fire Department has been charging his own firefighters \$100 a piece to take a specialized firefighting class — and then using taxpayer funds to reimburse his students, according to a complaint to the city.

An anonymous memorandum was sent to City Manager Jon Roberts in July, questioning the ethics and legality of Fire Chief John Becker charging city firefighters for the Fire Control 5 class he teaches. Fire Control 5 entails between 30 and 40 hours of instruction on airport-related fires.

"Chief Becker requires that this \$100 instruction fee be paid directly to him, and not the city of Victorville," the memo states.

The memo claims that class materials used in the course are prepared by Fire Department staff by order of Becker and that city vehicles, city workers and city facilities are also used in support of the class. The memo also states Becker has earned more than \$6,000 teaching the classes and that he has taught the class at least three times. The fire chief earns an annual salary of \$117,288 plus a car allowance of \$7,512, according to city officials.

"What you got is a bunch of lies, and I won't address a bunch of lies," Becker said in a short phone interview.

When asked if the City Council was aware of the classes, Becker said he made the decisions about the classes. The fire chief declined to comment further, saying he needed to meet with the city attorney. The two are to discuss the issue on Tuesday.

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"The city does not have anything to do with it," Becker said before hanging up.

Following a Press Dispatch inquiry into the memo on Friday, city officials said the city attorney will investigate allegations in the July 11 memo. It is not clear whether the city attorney's investigation will look at both legal and ethical issues.

City Councilman and former Fire Chief Rudy Cabriales said that he was not aware of the issue.

"From what I'm hearing it would appear unethical, maybe not illegal, but definitely unethical," Cabriales said. "It could be a conflict of interest, but I would have to gather more information," Cabriales said Friday.

The letter also pointed out that other high ranking officers teach classes to the staff on the weekends and do not charge fees.

Cabriales said that during his tenure as fire chief, he taught a number of classes, but never charged students for his services.

"I did my teaching through the college," Cabriales said.

Victorville Mayor Mike Rothschild directed all inquiries to the city attorney.

"There is no substance to this letter as far as I know. It is a serious charge and the matter is being referred to the city attorney for the protection of the city," Rothschild said.

Dr. Steven Frates, a senior fellow at the Rose Institute of State and Local Government, said it is unheard of for a fire chief to charge his employees to take a class from him.

"In my 30 years in the business, I never heard something like that," Frates said. "This is a question of ethics and it does not pass the smell test."

City Attorney Andre de Bortnowsky said he received a call from Deputy City Manager Doug Robertson Friday asking him to look at the matter.

"We are going to look at the facts of this matter, but to me it just sounds like a disgruntled employee," De Bortnowsky said, referring to the anonymous memo.

The same memo sent to Roberts was also forwarded to San Bernardino County District Attorney Michael Ramos.

"When we receive a complaint in writing. A file is opened and the matter is being reviewed. If it looks like an investigation needs to be opened, then we will do that," district attorney spokeswoman Susan Mickey said.

Victor Valley College officials confirmed that in the past there was an attempt to get Becker to teach the class under the college system. Becker declined the college's request, according to the college. If the course was taught through the college, students can earn course credits and the possibility of a reduced tuition fee.

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