

Council may look at parking meter firm's inspections

By Ronald Koziol

THE CITY COUNCIL'S Finance Committee urged Thursday that the full council name a special panel to investigate how the city's parking meters were handled by a private firm last winter.

Finance Committee members said they expect the special panel, which could be formed Friday, to have subpoena power and its own counsel for the investigation.

The committee acted on disclosures by The Tribune that Duncan Traffic Equipment Co., 40 W. Washington St., was paid \$270,000 for inspecting and maintaining the city's 24,374 parking meters in January and February, when most of the meters were buried in snow.

UNDER DUNCAN'S contract, the city pays no money unless inspections are performed.

Some aldermen call the payment to Duncan a "ripoff," but the firm said Thursday that it has records to prove it made the inspections.

Duncan president Jerome J. Robinson, who had been unavailable for comment for more than two months, declined to talk to a reporter visiting his office Thursday, but issued a written statement denying wrongdoing.

The reporter was referred to Robert Ellings, Duncan's new public relations aide.

On Wednesday, the city used Duncan for an accounting of the inspections or the return of the \$270,000.

ELLINGS, WHO has worked for Democratic Party officials, quoted Robinson as saying, "If it can be said that anyone welcomes a lawsuit, we welcome

this lawsuit."

The suit filed by the city also charges that Parking Meter Service Co., a subsidiary of Duncan, failed to collect money from some meters in January and February.

The suit listed no number of meters where the money went uncollected, making it appear that the money had not been collected from any meters. This was reported in Thursday's Tribune.

However, it was clarified Thursday that the city contends there were no collections from 626 of the meters.

Parking Meter Service and several firms with the name Duncan are controlled by Robinson. His firms, contributors to Democratic funds over the years, have held contracts to maintain, repair, and collect from the meters since meters were installed in 1951.

THE CALL for an investigating committee came in a resolution by Ald. Clifford Kelley (20th). It was cosponsored by 26 other aldermen, more than two-thirds of the 36-member council, and the Finance Committee approved it by voice vote. Only Ald. Burton Natarus (42d) voted no.

When committee chairman Wilson Frost (34th), an ally of Mayor Byrne, pointed out the city had filed a lawsuit, Ald. Marion Humes (8th) and others said it did not prevent the city council from investigating.

An investigating committee with subpoena power would be the council's first since its 1977-1978 investigation of a taxi fare increase. The fare increase generated the feud that led to Mrs. Byrne's replacing Michael Bilandic as mayor.