

Capitola fire board chooses city affiliation

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Capitola fire directors finally made up their minds last night, voting 3-2 for the Capitola Fire Protection District to be taken over by the city of Capitola.

"We can't be criticized for not making a decision anymore," Chairman Max Kludt said after the vote was taken.

He and director Richard Mendonca cast the two dissenting votes, with directors Wayne Fontes, Lane Lawson and Eugene Warren overruling them in favor of the subsidization.

The alternative being considered by the board was to join with the Central Fire Protection District. Such a move had been rejected twice before, once when the Central Fire District was formed from the old Live Oak and Soquel fire districts two years ago, and

again earlier this year when the board voted instead to approach the Capitola City Council.

The motion calls for the fire district to join the city in filing an application with the Santa Cruz County Local Agency Formation Commission. LAFCO must approve the city takeover of the fire district.

Capitola Mayor Michael Routh hailed the decision but took a cautious approach to

future support of the city takeover of the now-independent fire district.

"I am glad they finally decided to take an action," Routh said this morning, "but I reserve any exuberance until I see the action taken." Routh said that with fire director Lane Lawson leaving the board soon (he's moving to Scotts Valley), a new board majority might reverse last night's action.

Routh said he personally favors submitting an application to LAFCO now. "At this point, I want to see it go to LAFCO. Once we file an application, we will then get a true financial picture (of what it will cost the city). But all of the indications are now that that is the way to go and it will make it affordable to the city."

Prior to the decision, several residents beseeched the directors to vote for joining with the city of Capitola. Their main concern was that a merger with Central would phase out the Capitola fire station, and increase the response time to fires in the city.

However, Capitola Fire Chief Jerry Bowles — who favored a merger with Central — said later that the area's geography and population concentration

would never allow such a phase-out.

"We need a station this side of the creek and the highway," he said.

Capitola Fire Captain Charlie Howard — the only Capitola firefighter to openly support a city merger — testified that he believes a subsidization with the city will result in a better functioning fire department. He said he doesn't believe it will cost the "hundreds of thousands of dollars" he has heard reported in the media.

City-dispatched fire calls could save money now paid to the county for dispatch services, and the city also has more opportunity to get good prices on equipment, Howard said.

Though the directors appeared to have decided on their votes prior to last night's meeting, some said they were impressed by the handful of residents who turned out to testify for a merger with the city.

Director Fontes described the input as "positive," saying that what he'd heard reflected "community pride" and belief that such a merger had "fiscal potential."

It was the first time he'd heard input from the public on anything, Director Warren said.

Now that a decision has been made, it is up to City Manager Steve Burrell to present it to the council, Chief Bowles said after the meeting. The proposal must then be filed with the Local Agency Formation Commission for approval.

Warren said he's been assured that the Capitola Fire Protection District will remain in the picture for at least another year, until the city resolves what direction the merger will take.

In another matter, the board voted against paying dispatch service fees of \$4,370 to the county until a hearing with the Board of Supervisors to determine if the bill is legal.

The bill is for use of the 911 emergency number. Directors said they are not opposed to the bill itself, but to the manner in

which agencies are chosen to pay, as well as how the bill is calculated.

Bowles agreed. "Even though it's between \$4,000 and \$5,000, it's still the best game in town," he said.

However, he said the district signed a contract with the county several years ago for a formula in calculating the bill, then totalling \$4,108. The formula was dropped in favor of a 6 percent charge in 1982-83, resulting in an increase of \$868. Now, the formula has apparently been reinstated, and Bowles said he is concerned about the legality of such changes.

"They changed the rules without changing the contract," he said.

Neither Bowles nor the directors knew if the Board of Supervisors is even aware of the bill. The directors voted unanimously not to pay until a hearing can settle the matter once and for all.