

# Firefighters resist council takeover

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CAPITOLA — The Capitola Firefighters Association has urged the Local Agency Formation Commission to deny an application to reorganize the fire department as a subsidiary of the city of Capitola.

The Capitola City Council and the fire district board of directors has asked LAFCO to approve reorganization of the now-separate fire department as a subsidiary district of the city. It would be administered by the City Council.

LAFCO is scheduled to rule on the reorganization at its Wednesday meeting but Executive Director Pat McCormick says the city of Capitola has requested a four to six-week delay on that decision.

City Manager Steve Burrell said in a letter to LAFCO that the City Council and fire district board of directors want time to respond to a LAFCO-commissioned study that recommends against the plan.

Instead, the study by Hughes Heiss & Associates of San Mateo recommends Capitola Fire merge with neighboring Central Fire District.

The report concludes that consolidation is the only means of improving fire protection in Capitola without additional cost.

"The Capitola Firefighters Association is concerned, as you are, in providing the most efficient and safest fire protection for the residents of Capitola and the mid-county area. We feel that consolidation of the Central Fire Protection District and the Capitola Fire Protection District is the best way to achieve this at the least expense," said David Martone, president of the firefighters association, in a letter to LAFCO.

"One of our main concerns now is that we cannot depend on a fully-manned second engine responding to fire-related incidents. In a fire situation a life can depend on those extra seconds it takes to get adequate equipment and manpower to the scene, not to mention enhanced firefighter safety," says Martone of the firefighters association.

Currently, Capitola has one on-duty engine company (three firefighters and a captain). It relies on volunteers and off-duty firefighters

to man a second engine.

"With consolidation, that second engine would be on the road immediately," says Martone.

Nine of Capitola's 11 paid firefighters who are members of the association support consolidation, Martone says.

Chief Jerry Bowles also is on record as supporting consolidation.

The LAFCO study indicates that consolidation would bring about improved fire protection at no added cost.

Reorganization under the city, the report says, would result in the loss of \$300,000 the fire department now gets in state special-district funding.

The city would have to replace that money just to keep the current level of service. To add a second engine company would cost the city at least an additional \$300,000 a year.

In preparation for the Jan. 7 meeting, LAFCO staff has been expanding on the Hughes Heiss study.

McCormick says one area he has been looking at is possible fire insurance rate changes as a result of a merger.

Capitola currently is rated a "5" on a scale of 1 to 10 by the insurance industry. Central is a "4."

McCormick says it is possible that Capitola's rating would also drop to a "4" through consolidation. He noted that when Soquel and Live Oak fire districts merged to make Central Fire District in 1984, Soquel's fire rating fell from "6" to "4," which was Live Oak's rating at that time.

A rating reduction would have little effect for owners of single family homes in Capitola, McCormick says.

But, he says one insurance company's premium for restaurants would be cut by 40 to 50 percent.

He says rate comparisons indicate a 5 percent premium reduction for owners of small apartments or wood-frame retail shops.

Insurance ratings are based on a variety of factors, including construction of buildings in the community, built-in fire protection measures, the water distribution system and the fire department's manpower and equipment.

Because of the variety of factors, it's conceivable that the right combination could be reached through consolidation that could even lower the rating to a "3."