

Aptos fire chief fires back at critics

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By MIKE WALLACE

Aptos Fire Chief Richard Chinn Tuesday staunchly defended his handling of last Thursday's disaster drill, and won the backing of Aptos fire commissioners for his efforts.

In a 45-minute session with the fire board, during the board's regular monthly meeting at the fire house, Chinn attributed the criticism of the drill by other law enforcement agencies to their poor performance in the simulated exercise.

Chinn said he didn't think District Attorney Phil Harry would charge him with making a false report to law enforcement agencies. But he said that if such a charge is filed, he will defend himself to the fullest and bring out information that would make other agencies in the county look less than sterling.

"Quite frankly," Chinn told directors, "I am the person who's accused. and if Mr. Harry doesn't drop his plans, then all the garbage about all the rotten operations of some departments in the county are going to come out — because I'll see that they come out."

Chinn was referring to the operations of other county fire and law enforcement agencies during last Thursday's drill, in which the Aptos chief asked the county communications center for aid in a helicopter crash.

The crash, of course, was fictitious, but firemen, sheriff's deputies, highway patrolmen and ambulances raced to the scene nonetheless, many at high speeds and with lights and sirens flashing.

After the drill, there was criticism from some quarters — especially the sheriff's office — because agencies had not been notified of the fact that this was not a real disaster. At the request of the sheriff's office, the district attorney is looking into

whether or not he should file criminal charges against Chinn, charging him with making a false report.

Richard Duchscher, chairman of the fire board, started the session by criticizing local news outlets for "irresponsible reporting," and said that he was backing Chinn on the drill based on information provided by his wife. Mrs. Duchscher works at Dominican Hospital, and told her husband the drill had been a good thing.

Duchscher did, however, have some criticism of Chinn, saying the chief should have informed fire commissioners about the drill immediately afterward, so they would be prepared to answer questions from constituents.

Chinn was also backed up by Thomas Hart, an administrative assistant at Dominican, who was in the audience. He said he had approached Chinn with the idea for the drill in the first place, and that when the exercise was over, he had found it "very rewarding."

The discussion then moved on to the performance of other agencies. Commissioner Stuart Davis asked Chinn if the sheriff's department had been asked to send its squad cars Code Three — lights blinking and sirens howling.

"They were not requested Code Three at all," Chinn replied. He said that in a case such as this, the sheriff's department would have been asked to provide traffic control, security, and perhaps investigative service. None of this, he said, justified such a high-speed dash to the scene. "What do you need to go 90 miles an hour for?" he asked rhetorically. "That doesn't prove anything."

Chinn said that he had talked to the local highway patrol commander about the drill, but that the officers who responded were not aware that the crash was not real.

When the first highway patrolman arrived, Chinn told him this was a drill and said that if a real emergency were to occur, the patrolman should respond to it.

The second highway patrolman on the scene "didn't even do what he was supposed to do," said Chinn. "He didn't report to the officer in charge — which was me."

The chief continued, "I believe this was also the same officer who told the press he had come to the scene at speeds of up to 120 miles per hour." Chinn lent an ominous tone to his voice. "If he had been working for me," said Chinn, "he'd have had some time off the next day — can tell you that."

Chinn had praise for the other fire departments on the scene, and said they had supported him. "The surrounding fire departments are not kicking at all," he said. "They think it's the best thing we've ever done."

But Chinn had less kind words for the county communications center. The chief said he had requested an ambulance, but two had been sent, and they had gotten lost on the way.

"We can't have people running around like crazy," said Chinn. "We can't have Communications sending things the fire chief on the scene didn't order."

Talking about the possibility he might have to defend his actions in court, Chinn said that if he is charged he will argue that his case was "prejudiced by misquotes" in local newspapers. He did not say when he had been misquoted, and at another point in the meeting had complained that newspapers had not called him for comment on the drill.

He also said that although he was familiar with the false alarm sections of the fire code, he had not been familiar with the section of the state penal code under which the district attorney is considering prosecuting him.

"I know ignorance of the law is no excuse," said Chinn, but "when I heard about section 148.3 of the penal code, I had to go to the book and look it up."

"You know what bothers me about all this," said Chinn. "If you look at this as an emergency situation, the question you should ask is how well did the county handle it? The answer is it didn't handle it worth a damn."

Fire commissioners backed Chinn on the drill, with the most vocal praise coming from Davis and Duchscher.

"Once in a great while, somebody has the ability and the guts to go ahead and do something like this," said Davis. "I think this is one of the five best drills held anywhere in the United States this year."

Duchscher concurred. "Hell," he said, "we should be congratulated about this disaster drill instead of having all these statements thrown at us."

Later on, he said, "When I was a kid and other people got invited to a birthday party and I didn't, I was p—. I think Sheriff Noren and some of the others feel that way about this."

Commissioner Walter Jordan pointed out that had there been an accident or mishap stemming from the drill, the fire district would have accepted the responsibility for it. He did, however, criticize Chinn for not notifying board members in advance. "In the future," he said, "we should be told something's happening before it's happened."

Commissioner Don Eddlemon said he thought the drill had served its purpose in pointing out inadequacies in the county's emergency response system. He also griped about news coverage, saying, "The news media's never done us any favors."

Chinn wrapped up his comments by telling the commissioners:

"Let me assure this board I will never conduct a drill in this county again. They can just stick it in their ear."

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APTOS BRANCH
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7695 SOQUEL DRIVE
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