

LAFCO approves fire consolidation

By BOB SMITH

Consolidation of the Soquel and Live Oak fire districts into a single agency, and a new sphere of influence for the Midcounty's Santa Cruz County Sanitation District were approved by the county Local Agency Formation Commission last Wednesday morning.

The fire district merger, which would be the first in Santa Cruz County's history and a possible forerunner of similar moves elsewhere, was unanimously approved by the

LAFCO commissioners, who indicated they would welcome similar consolidations from other county fire districts.

The merger must still be approved by the County Board of Supervisors.

Central County Fire Chief Harry Rowe said the new district will be able to operate more efficiently and at slightly less cost than the two independent districts, which had previously formed a joint-power agency that has

been operating one fire department for the two districts for the last 21 months.

Rowe said the new department has been able to handle most of its emergency calls, including major fires, without calling on neighboring departments for help.

Acting LAFCO chairman Robley Levy called the merger "a highly significant step."

Commissioner Stanley Nielsen echoed that statement, adding that

"it would be wonderful if they could pass it on to other districts."

"Like Capitola, for example," added Supervisor Gary Patton, another LAFCO commissioner.

Capitola, now completely surrounded by the Central Fire District, participated in early talks on the merger, but dropped out in hopes of a still-to-be-realized possibility that the city of Capitola would take over the fire district.

The sphere of influence for the Santa Cruz County Sanitation District, which provides sewer service to homes and businesses in the

coastal plain stretching from the Santa Cruz city limits in Live Oak to Seaside, sets the ultimate limits for the district's expansion and generally follows the county's urban limit line.

But as approved by LAFCO, the new sphere excludes 755 acres — nearly 1¼ square miles already in the district but not actually served by sewers — from the new sphere of influence because the property lies outside the urban-limit line.

Patton was successful in amending the commission's draft resolution, pressuring the district to come back

with a master plan for detaching the land outside the sphere that is not presently part of the sanitation district.

That includes the Seaside Highlands area of Aptos.

The resolution also bars the extension of sewer lines into several agriculturally zoned parcels inside the urban-limit line, including the Polo Grounds in Aptos, the apple orchard next to the Deer Park Shopping Center and the Brown Bulb Ranch on the west side of Capitola Mall, until zoning on that land is changed by the county Board of Supervisors.