

# Aptos chamber throws cold water on fire protection fee

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APTOS — A proposed fire protection fee was greeted with something less than open arms this morning by the Aptos Chamber of Commerce.

While no official stand was taken, directors were obviously concerned with the proposed \$200 to \$250 yearly charge to commercial businesses within the Aptos Fire Protection District.

Chamber member Virginia Booz went so far as to describe that portion of the proposal as a "nightmare." Chamber President Brewster Burns said afterward he got the feeling

"everybody is against additional taxes."

The Fire Board is leaning toward a June special election on the proposed benefit-user fee. A public hearing has been scheduled for Feb. 22. The board is facing a March 1 deadline to set up an election.

At stake, Assistant Fire Chief Al Forbes told chamber members, is the closure of the department's Rio del Mar station, as well as the loss of its acclaimed paramedic emergency unit.

The proposed fees will be needed "just to maintain" the current level of services if the state's special district augmentation funds are cut off, he said. At this point, it is not known

whether Aptos will receive any or all of the \$609,000 in state funds it received this year.

The proposed fees will run between \$30 (vacant parcels) to \$250 (commercial buildings) a year, according to Forbes. Residential units like single-family homes and condominiums would be charged \$75.

Concern of chamber members became obvious when Forbes told them that small commercial businesses, such as a 500-square-foot barber shop would be subject to the same charge as large grocery stores. Also, each commercial business within a large shopping center like Deer Park or Rancho del Mar would have to pay \$200 to \$250.

Forbes explained they are prohibited by Proposition 13 from basing their charges on property valuation and, thus, the across-the-board fees.

He said the fees were actually "very inexpensive" considering what the public was paying for fire protection before Proposition 13. The loss of

the Rio del Mar station would probably affect fire insurance rates, particularly for commercial businesses, he added.

Chamber members suggested possible alternatives might be broached. Burns said later, "There simply weren't any other alternatives offered. It was this fee or lose fire services."

Forbes added the election was seen as a necessity because if they were not to receive state funds, "we would be without funding for a year."

The proposed charges are based on the district receiving no state bailout money. If they were to receive some money, the fee would be adjusted accordingly.

The Fire Board's public hearing will be held at 7:30 p.m. Feb. 22 at the main fire station on Soquel Drive.

In other business, the chamber heard one of the new alternatives for the proposed Wingspread Beach development proposal for the 67-acre Porter-Sesnon parcel.

Hare, Brewer and Kelley spokes-

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man Tim Welch explained the alternative. It calls for a reduction of residential units to 295, leasing 40 percent of the beachfront land to the state for park and public access, and retaining the performing arts complex.

Early on, the chamber endorsed the original Wingspread proposal that included 600 units and a theater district. The new alternative was greeted warmly and no change in their stand was made.

They were pleased the performing arts facilities were included in the latest alternative. Those facilities would include 1,000-seat and 500-seat theaters and a 200-seat rehearsal hall.