

# Watsonville fire chief set to take Aptos job

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Sentinel staff writer

**WATSONVILLE** — Gary Smith, the city's fire chief for nearly 15 years, confirmed Thursday he has been offered a contract as chief of the Aptos-La Selva fire district.

"It's a good news, bad news story," Smith said. "Watsonville is in me ... and I've been devoted to making the community better. But this is a great opportunity."

A spokesman for the Aptos-La Selva Fire Protection District said the contract offer will be discussed by the board of directors at a special meeting today at 4 p.m.

Smith said one of the reasons he was interested in the Aptos-La Selva position is that the board wants

to create a "new vision," one that includes a plan to work cooperatively with neighboring fire districts.

"Every fire chief knows ... there are far too many (fire) departments in this county," Smith said. "It would be more effective to combine forces."

Smith said it's important to maintain stability and strength in each district, but to be open to looking at the regional picture, too.

In fact, Smith said, his new job grew out of a discussion about possibly consolidating some fire-management services in the Watsonville-Aptos area.

"I was not looking for a job, and at the same time I was impressed with the fire board's vision for the fu-

ture," he said.

If the Aptos-La Selva board signs the contract that already has Smith's signature on it, he will receive an annual salary of \$99,000.

Smith, who started his firefighting career in Davis in 1971, has gained an international reputation for his work in the safe handling of anhydrous ammonia — a common chemical in the cold-storage, agriculture and co-generation plant industries.

Along with Patrick Johnson, a retired assistant fire chief from Shreveport, La., Smith created an annual ammonia-safety summit in Watsonville dedicated to teaching the industry and firefighters about the dangerous chemical.

Smith has a personal stake in the

safe handling of ammonia: The Watsonville-Pajaro area has 32 facilities that use anhydrous ammonia, primarily as a refrigerant in the cold-storage industry.

But Smith's influence in Watsonville isn't confined to the firehouse. Since 1991, he has been assistant city manager, taking on duties throughout City Hall.

"It was going to be a temporary thing to fill the gap until we could hire an assistant manager, and it never happened," Smith said.

He also has been active in community organizations ranging from the Spirit of Watsonville, which resurrected the Fourth of July celebration, to Si Se Puede, a residential drug-treatment program.

"It's a big loss for us," said City Manager Carlos Palacios. "Gary's done a lot for the city ... (and) he's been very involved in the community."

"We are definitely going to miss his energy," said Jose Torres, director of Main Street Watsonville, a downtown business organization. "He was always helpful (and) he

brought people together. ... With his energy and his knowledge, he will be difficult to replace."

Smith, who grew up in Fort Bragg, was a fire marshal and assistant chief in Manteca before coming to Watsonville in 1984. He earned a bachelor's degree in fire administration from Cogswell Polytechnical College.