

Fire districts defy county

Showdown over 911 fees could be the result

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Several fire districts have refused to pay their bills from Santa Cruz County to cover emergency (911) dispatch services.

The fire districts want the county to know they are still angry about its decision to charge the fire districts for use of the 911 telephone system. Until 1983, the county bore the operating expenses of the communications center.

"We want to bring it to a head," Chief Harry Rowe of the Central County Fire District said. "We're tired of dealing with it and we just want an answer this time."

Rowe, along with Aptos-La Selva Fire Chief Al Forbes and Salsipuedes Fire Chief Ron Hart gave several reasons their districts have so far refused to pay the fees for last year's dispatching services.

One is that the fire districts believe emergency dispatch services should be paid for with the county's general fund. The chiefs say they believed that when the communications center was established several years ago, the agreement was

for the fire departments to pay for the needed equipment, and the county would pay for the staff.

The fire chiefs also argue that if the county is going to charge a "user's fee," the fee should be charged to the general public.

"The fire departments are not the users of the service," Forbes said, "the people are the users of the service."

Second, the fire chiefs believe that if the county is charging the fire districts for the dispatch services on the grounds it will now charge all non-county agencies that use it, then all such agencies should be charged. The state Department of Fish and Game uses the service, but so far has not been charged, the chiefs say.

Third, the fire chiefs said they thought that during the 1984 budget hearings, the Board of Supervisors agreed not to levy the fees until the county administrative officer reported on a study on the communications center.

The CAO made that report in October, but there is a disagreement over whether or not the fees were to be charged after that report was presented.

And finally, the fire chiefs question the method of establishing the fees.

The fire chiefs agreed in 1983 to a formula based on population and number of fire calls for determining how much each department should pay. But Central County's Rowe said in the following year the county didn't refigure the payment based on the most recent population and incident figures, but instead just asked for a six percent increase over the previous year. Rowe questioned whether it was fair to assume each district is still carrying the same percentage of the dispatch center's workload.

The Salsipuedes Fire District board has passed a resolution opposing the fees; the Central District board has not agreed to pay them yet. Forbes said he and his board know they will eventually have to pay, but they wanted to resolve some of the issues involved.

In response to the fire chiefs' complaints, county General Services Manager Mel Angel — who is also fire marshal — said he would perform a study of the dispatchers' workload to determine who is using the services

— including whether any other non-county agencies that aren't paying are using the services.

Angel said the supervisors never intended to waive the fees last year, but merely asked they be delayed until October.

He said the county didn't think there would be much change in the breakdown of the districts' charges and therefore didn't see any need to refigure the fees each year. Instead, the county just tacked on a six percent increase to cover the rise in the consumer price index and in the county's personnel expenses.

If fire districts thought they weren't paying a fair share of the fees, they should have raised that question a year ago when the fees were established for the upcoming year, Angel said.

Angel said he will be meeting with County Administrative Officer George Newell soon to discuss the dispute with the fire districts.

"The bottom line is the fire agencies have been adamantly opposed to the policy of charging the fees," Angel said, "and now they want to question the county on everything it does."