

# Aromas to look at bottom line on fire service

By STEVE SHENDER

Aromas Tri-County Fire District commissioners will discuss ways to pull some financial rabbits out of the district's fiscal hat when they meet this evening at the fire house at 7:30 p.m.

Commissioners are scheduled to discuss a proposal by Fire Chief Ken French for a fee on new construction in the district and to hold a general discussion of "future revenue generators," according to the agenda for the meeting. This evening's meeting is the board's first since Aromas voters torpedoed North Monterey County fire district consolidation by a 2-1 margin last week.

French said Monday his fee proposal is modeled on an ordinance enacted by the Scotts Valley Fire Protection District last year. Under his proposal, he said, a one-time fee of 20 cents per square foot would be imposed on new structures not protected by automatic sprinkler systems, while the fee levied on newly constructed buildings with such systems would be 10 cents a square foot.

The one-time fees, French said, would reimburse the fire district for its "administrative time as far as plan checks are concerned and for redoing our run cards." The chief said the fees, which would amount to \$200 to \$300 for an average size single family home (without sprinklers), were "not unreasonable."

"If somebody wants to come out here and build a home or business in our district, with the existing equipment and manpower we have, it's kind of like paying (an) entry fee," French said.

French said that while his proposed fee would apply to new construction districtwide, the proposal was for the time being aimed at some property in San

Benito County which may soon be annexed to the Aromas fire district. He said the property, on Betabel Road just outside district boundaries, has been designated by San Benito County planners as a shopping center site. French said he planned to approach the San Benito County Local Agency Formation Commission about annexing the land because "we serve it anyway."

The Aromas chief said he had first learned of Scotts Valley's use of the new-construction fee as a fire district financing device about two months ago. French said he subsequently decided to wait until after the consolidation election to propose it to his own fire board. "I didn't want to discuss this prior to consolidation because if consolidation went through, it would be a waste of time," he said.

Consolidation with the North Monterey County (formerly Castroville) Fire District was vehemently opposed by three of Aromas' five fire commissioners, who argued that a merger would mean "loss of local control" over fire services for Aromas voters.

Proponents of consolidation argued that the Aromas district would be financially hard-pressed if it did not amalgamate with the larger North County district.

The Aromas district, which ended the 1980-81 fiscal year in the red, avoided similar embarrassment this year by deferring payments on a new fire truck and an insurance premium until after July 1, the start of the new fiscal year.

French said Monday that Aromas is not facing any financial problems that aren't being confronted by other fire districts.

"Everybody's hurting for money," he said, calling his proposed fee "a legal measure all fire districts are looking at."

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