

Fire district seeks a 'sugar daddy'

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CAPITOLA → Capitola Fire District still wants to walk down the aisle.

But, directors have had trouble making up their minds whose ring to accept.

Central Fire District, which surrounds Capitola, has been an on-again, off-again suitor. Formed by the consolidation of Soquel and Live Oak fire districts last year, Central Fire proposed to offer additional fire-fighting capability and leadership at no cost to Capitola.

Capitola directors liked the idea of having a second fire engine immediately available to respond to a house fire.

Currently, Capitola has four firefighters on duty per shift. When a fire is reported, three head out on the first fire engine. The fourth firefighter waits until volunteers arrive and then they roll on the second engine.

Central Fire says it could immediately

offer a second engine from either its 17th Avenue or Soquel stations.

The Capitola Firefighters Association and Chief Jerry Bowles are on record as supporting consolidation, saying they feel joining with Central Fire District would be the most cost-effective way to provide improved fire protection for their district residents.

Capitola appointed two board members — Gene Warren and Wayne Fontes — to meet with representatives from Central Fire to further analyze those benefits.

Several meetings were held, including one April 8. That meeting was continued to April 15, at which the full boards of directors of Capitola and Central sat down to hear from the representatives.

Capitola's representatives went first. According to minutes from that meeting, Warren gave a recap of the committee meetings, covering such items as com-

parisons of wages in the two fire departments and funding for operations.

Then, Max Kludt, chairman of the Capitola board asked Fontes if he had anything to add.

Fontes replied "no," but said he would like to make a motion.

Central Fire directors were floored when Fontes moved that he be allowed to approach the city of Capitola to ask that city takeover of the fire department be put on the ballot.

His motion was seconded and won on a voice vote.

The remainder of items on that April 15 agenda were never heard. Central's directors got up and walked out.

It's not the first time Capitola has backed out just a few steps from the altar. Directors participated in the formation of Central Fire District, but they turned and ran back to the city of Capitola at the last minute.

Not only was Central Fire jilted again, it was slapped in the face, Kludt, chairman of Capitola's board believes.

So, Monday night when his board met again, he submitted a letter of apology to the Central Fire board. "The waste of time of your members who attended the meeting and the total waste of your staff's preparation and attendance time is, in my opinion, inexcusable," Kludt wrote. A motion to send that letter died for lack of a second.

Directors now want what they say is a simple "yes" or "no" from district residents in November on the issue of a city takeover of the fire department.

In the meantime, directors Monday night asked Warren and Fontes to see how much it would cost for the city to provide the same kind of service that Central Fire proposed to offer for free.

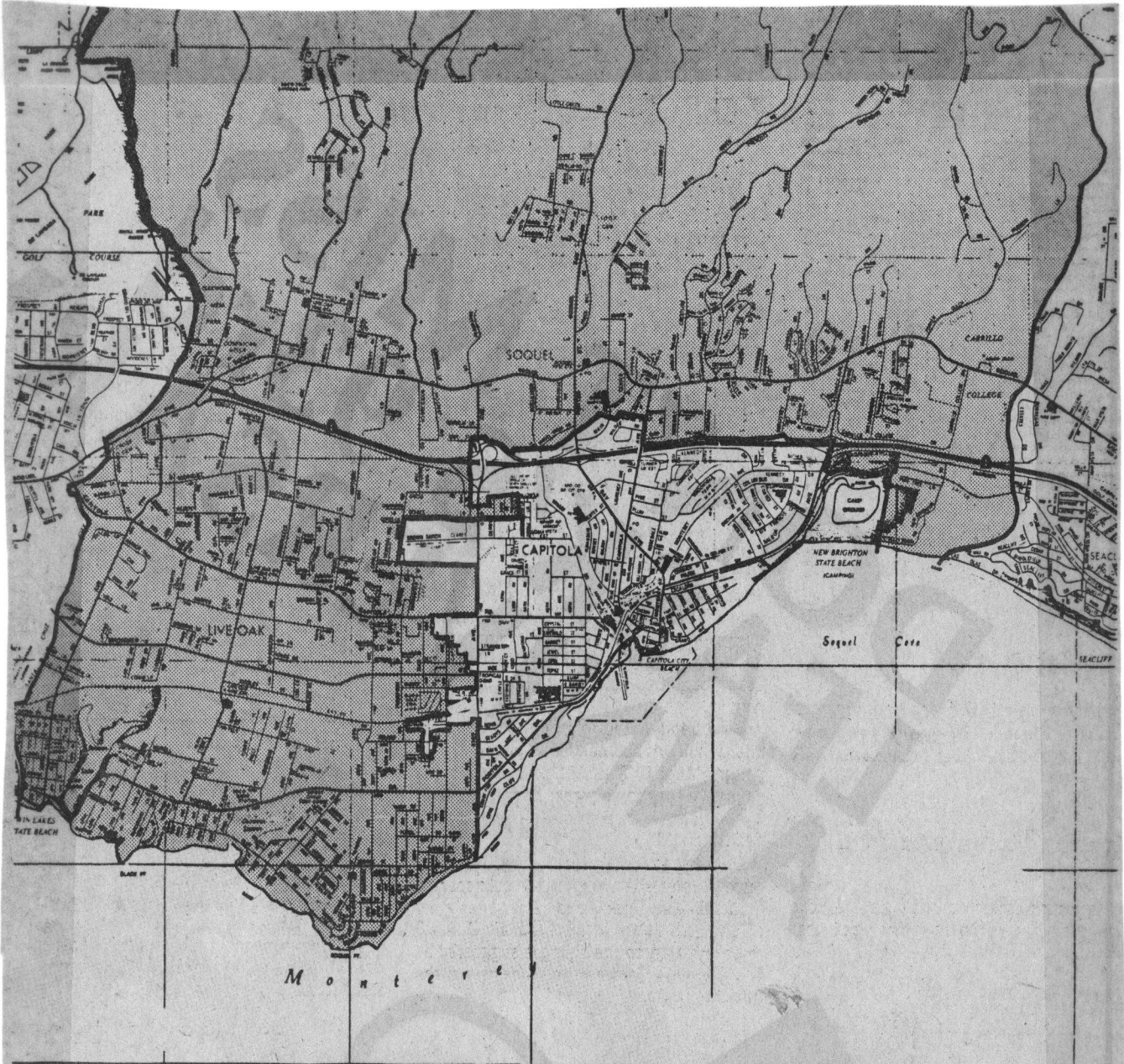
Kludt, who says he personally favors joining Central Fire, figures the cost of adding a second engine company (a total of nine or 10 more firefighters) and associated equipment would cost about a half-million dollars a year.

That's a half-million dollars, he says, to accomplish what directors could do with a stroke of a pen if they voted to consolidate with Central Fire.

But, money is not the object or is it?

Director Fontes says he and Warren will look at just what is needed. Because more than 90 percent of Capitola's calls

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The Central Fire District includes shaded area of mid-county.

are medical emergencies, perhaps a second engine company is not even needed, he says.

The big advantage of a city takeover, he says, is local autonomy he believes would be lost if Capitola Fire District were swallowed up by Central Fire.

Also, no permanent method of financing fire districts has been established since Proposition 13 chopped off a majority of their funding — the property tax.

Fontes says Central Fire's financial future is no more sound than Capitola's and that's what prompted Capitola to go out

looking for a mate in the first place.

The city of Capitola, on the other hand, has all that sales-tax revenue from 41st Avenue jingling in its pockets.

But, the fire district has had a story relationship with the city, too, dating back before Kludt was hired as city manager in 1973.

The desire to become a city fire department, he says, started when Capitola had a police district, too. The city, Kludt said, took over the police district "that consisted of two or three men and one car. A city takeover was easy."

But, he contends, times have changed.

A study (Sierra Group Study) in 1975 recommended eventual consolidation of all fire districts in the county. It was the impetus that brought about Central Fire District.

That study was cited by Aptos and La Selva Beach fire districts in their recent decision to pursue eventual consolidation

Consolidation, Kludt says, "is so logical and simple it's one of those things that's staring you in the face but you don't see it."