

Midcounty fire chiefs say 'super department' feasible

By BOB SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Four Midcounty fire chiefs say it is feasible to merge their departments into one super department — but the ultimate decision will be a political one made by their boards of directors.

For the last four months, teams from the Aptos/La Selva, Central, Branciforte and Scotts Valley fire

departments have been looking at the possibility of merging.

The study was prompted by a bill — SB 848 — in the Legislature last session that would have given county Local Agency Formation commissions the power to force fire and other special districts to consolidate.

LAFCO has the power now to approve or disapprove a merger

but doesn't have the power to initiate one. SB 848 would have given that option to LAFCOs throughout California.

At that time, Aptos/La Selva Fire Chief Chuck Mornard and the other fire chiefs argued that it would be better for the fire districts to plan their futures, rather than let LAFCO do the work and come up with a plan that might be

unworkable or politically unacceptable to local communities.

The bill never made it into law, but the study went ahead anyway — partly on the assumption that the state Legislature will still try to force some sort of fire district consolidation throughout the state.

All of the fire chiefs believe that merging the four districts — or even two or three — is very fea-

sible.

But the time lines to get a merger through before the start of the 1993-94 fiscal year are very tight.

Directors need to make up their minds in January, Mornard indicated this morning.

"It's a political decision now," Mornard said in his role as spokesman for the study group.

"The report is accurate. It is feasible, and it makes sense."

The report was based on several assumptions: There would be no layoffs, no salary reductions, no premature retirements, only two battalion chiefs per shift (normally there are three 24-hour shifts) and with the exception of the four fire chiefs, no reductions in rank.

See MERGER / back of section ►

MERGER

► From Page 1

Administrative personnel would be reassigned either to other staff positions or back to line positions — possibly as battalion chiefs.

The report concludes that although it would be desirable to man each of the consolidated district's fire engines with three firefighters, it can't initially be done.

With the exception of the Branciforte station, all of the other stations would continue at their present manning levels. Branciforte would be raised to the level of having two firefighters on duty each day.

The Aptos/La Selva department has set itself apart from the other fire agencies in Santa Cruz County for the last decade by offering its residents paramedic-level medical aid.

Past boards of directors have continued the service even after a private ambulance company began offering similar service for the rest of the county and the county Board of Supervisors gave the private operator the exclusive right to transport ill or injured patients to local hospitals.

Directors have made it clear in past years that they didn't want to see the fire department's paramedic service discontinued as a result of any merger.

The report recognizes the Aptos/La Selva position. It recommends keeping the existing paramedic unit in the Aptos/La Selva area (now housed at the Rio del Mar station on Bonita Drive) and adding a paramedic unit at Scotts Valley's Station One.

The remainder of the new district would continue to be served by the private ambulance company's paramedic units based on 41st Avenue, Santa Cruz and the San Lorenzo Valley.

Mornard said this morning that he didn't know what the stance of the present Aptos/La Selva board — with two members — is on the merger.

During the last election, directors Curtis Gabriel and Steve Mills indicated they wanted to put the merger issue up to the district's voters.

Mornard added this morning that representatives of the area's homeowners associations with whom he's talked are opposed to the merger.