

Capitola Fire District at the crossroads — still

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Indecision by the Capitola Fire District Board of Directors has allowed leadership and morale problems to smolder and, some say, the department to deteriorate.

Directors have been trying to decide for at least two years how best to guarantee fire protection, either by merging with neighboring Live Oak and Soquel fire districts or by becoming a city department. So far they have been unable to decide and now there's been expressed concern the board will never be able to decide.

The Fire Department has been without a chief since longtime chief Harold Jarvis retired last December. Failure to name a chief was cited some months later when the county grand jury reported serious management and morale problems and called the Capitola Fire Department a "serious threat to life and property."

That charge by the grand jury has been universally rejected, no matter what one's view of problems in the department.

Even neighboring Central County Fire Chief Harry Rowe puts it as strongly as anyone in Capitola when he terms the grand jury's statement "garbage." Capitola's firefighters, Rowe says, "have the knowledge and the ability to protect their community."

Capitola Fire District directors decided not to name a new chief because they were discussing merging with the neighboring Soquel and Live Oak fire districts. Chiefs of those other two districts also were retiring and a merger was considered an economical way to replace three chiefs with one.

In the meantime, the Capitola board named its fire inspector, Jerry Bowles, acting chief of administration, but gave him no real say in the operation. Fire suppression responsibility was given whichever captain was on duty. It was a "chief for a day" arrangement. Later, Bowles was given more authority and ultimately has been granted full powers as acting chief. He, in turn, has designated a captain as training officer and says training has been improved both for the 14 paid firefighters and similar number of volunteers.

The fire board participated in consolidation talks with Soquel and Live Oak right until it came time to make a decision to join. In July 1981, directors of the Soquel and Live Oak fire boards agreed to a joint powers agreement, with representatives of each of the two districts to direct what has become the Central County Fire Agency.

Capitola did not join and instead decided to pursue the option of a future

either together with or as part of the city of Capitola.

The Fire Department is autonomous. The fire district predates the city in fact, having been organized in 1937. The department has grown with the city and the surrounding non-city land it covers and now is responsible for protecting some of the largest structures in the county. Demand for service has grown from 168 calls in 1970 to 1,092 in 1981.

Negotiations with the city seemed to reach fruition in September when the Capitola City Council voted to approve an agreement which calls for joint management of the Fire Department by two members of the fire board, two members of the City Council and a fifth member to be selected by the other four.

Capitola Fire directors did not vote on the proposal at their last meeting, Oct. 12, because their chairman, Wayne Fontes, could not attend. He told The Sentinel he also is on the school board and was needed to make a quorum at that meeting so business could be conducted.

The matter will be discussed again Nov. 8. and, even if the entire board is present, some people aren't holding their breath for there does not appear to be unanimous agreement.

Insiders see a division developing with two board members leaning toward the agreement, two leaning toward reopening

negotiations to join Central County Fire and one undecided.

Capitola City Councilman Mick Routh, who served on a joint committee which negotiated the proposed agreement, believes the fire board may never approve the agreement.

"What amazes me is they (fire district) made the overture to the city and now they seem to be backing out," he says.

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negotiate with Israel.

war. He didn't list others, but in the past,

which also included the foreign ministers of Syria and Saudi Arabia — will return

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Routh says he expects the fire board will "continue to do nothing . . . to vacillate, wondering which way to go."

Fire service in Capitola, Routh says, has deteriorated. "If they (fire board) don't get it together, it's only going to get worse."

Discussions between the city and the fire district about a city fire department are long standing. "They've been sitting on the fence for six or eight years and haven't been able to make a decision," Routh charges.

Fire board Chairman Fontes disagrees. First, he notes there has been a change of membership on the board since not only those earlier discussions with the city, but since the grand jury report.

Fontes says the issue will be decided.

He says he was elected to the board on a "one-plank" campaign, to bring about a city fire department. "My purpose and energies have been directed toward coming into the city. I haven't flip-flopped and don't anticipate the board will."

Director Lane Lawson said, he, too, believes a decision will be made. "I would venture to say a decision one way or the other will take place within a reasonable

period of time." He refused further comment, citing his "position with the bank (a branch manager) and in the community."

Longtime Director Richard Mendonca would not comment, saying discussion of the proposal should take place during meeting sessions and not in the newspaper.

It's not as simple as the city awaiting, though perhaps not expecting, a favorable decision from the fire board. Consider that the department's volunteers and the Capitola Firefighters Association wrote letters to the board on Oct. 6, recommending directors to not join the city, but with Central County Fire.

Firefighters association President Steven Howton says an immediate solution is needed to the leadership problem. The department's top priority, he says, must be to hire a permanent fire chief.

"Going with Central would provide a chief and a management team now," he says.

There are other pressing problems, he says, such as the need for improved training and better response of equipment and manpower to emergencies.

Currently, Capitola has an automatic aid agreement with Central County Fire for the joint response of equipment to

major "target" structures, such as the Capitola Mall, in the event of a fire.

With a typical shift complement of four firefighters, Capitola normally responds three men on one engine to any other fire. The fourth firefighter stays back at the station to drive a second engine as soon as volunteers arrive.

"It's been proven that the first four minutes of a fire are most important. If you don't have the manpower the fire's going to get bigger and bigger."

By joining Central County Fire, Howton says training would be standardized as would be equipment and hose lays. Boundaries would be eliminated so the nearest unit to an emergency would respond. And, there would be backup from either the Live Oak or Soquel station so three engines would be on the street immediately.

Central County has eliminated boundaries in Live Oak and Soquel and immediately responds three engines to any structure fire.

Howt says his association has been impressed with the Central County Fire. "They've shown us they can really accomplish something."

What improvements a city-fire district venture could accomplish are uncertain, he says. The proposed agreement is general in scope and there's been no history of cooperation. "Our board can't work with the city now so there's no reason to believe it can work with the city (to put the agreement to work)," Howton says.

The proposed agreement is for two years. Howton wonders what would happen if, at the end of two years, the fire board and the city couldn't make it work.

"While the city and the fire board are not sure what they want to do, Central is doing things — they've rewritten their training program, they've worked on boundaries to improve their response time and they're looking at a service fee (special assessment to guarantee future funding)," Howton says.

Routh believes the city can offer the Fire Department a good future.

"The city is financially solvent; the fire district isn't. The city has management expertise; the fire district has absolutely none," he says. "Those are the two major problems they face and we have the means to solve both."

One issue on which all seem to agree is whatever decision is to be made will be important, yet difficult.

Still, Howton says the waiting has become as important as a decision. "They (fire board) have been talking with the city and with Central and nothing is being done . . . They haven't made a step in any direction.

"We don't want a quick decision, but we feel it's taken too long."

Morale, he says, is low. "There's a lot of frustration that nothing is being done."

Central County Fire Agency is willing to sit down again with Capitola, if that's what the Capitola board decides to do.

"There's never been any change in our position. Speaking for the board, our original goals of several years ago still are valid, that mid-county should be a combined effort," says Chief Rowe.

He says Central has not been contacted "recently" by the Capitola Fire board. "But," he says, "our board has always been willing to talk to them."