

Fire department merger up to Freedom

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Freedom Fire Chief Ben Evans and Watsonville Fire Chief Gary Smith outlined plans for a contract agreement between their departments last night at a public hearing held jointly by the Freedom Fire District board and the Watsonville City Council.

The City Council seemed prepared to approve the plan last night, but at Mayor Ann Soldo's urging decided to take no action until the Freedom board has time to consider it further. The Freedom board will consider the plan at its next meeting, Dec. 17 at 7 p.m., at the fire station. Fire board chairman Norm Craven said the board nearly killed the idea at its last meeting.

Some Freedom residents have expressed concern that joining Freedom with Station 2 would mean less protection for outlying areas and perhaps lead to an annexation of Freedom by Watsonville.

According to the proposal, the Freedom fire station at Airport and Freedom boulevards would be closed. The five paid firefighters would be stationed at Watsonville Station 2, less than half-a-mile away on Airport Boulevard.

Under the plan, the Freedom Fire Board would retain authority over its personnel at Station 2 for a year, and over the fate of the unused Freedom station. During that year, the district would not merge with the Watsonville department; it would negotiate a

contract to provide fire protection for the Freedom area, the chiefs said.

The chiefs last night called for a one-year test. A "trial marriage," Evans called it.

After the year-long interim agreement, Freedom firefighters would become Watsonville city employees.

Smith would remain as chief. Evans would become a battalion chief at the top salary step.

The benefit of a joint operating agreement, the chiefs said, would be a higher and safer level of service.

Station 2 would be manned by four people most of the time and by at least three at all times. Currently, Station 2 is manned by two firefighters. Freedom Fire Station is manned by one.

The difference can be seen in the crucial first minutes of a fire, because putting more firefighters on a fire at the start makes all the difference, the chiefs said.

"An aggressive, hard-hitting initial attack can stop a fire. Reserves can extinguish it," Smith said.

"To put a lot of water in the right place you have to have the people to do it," he said.

The reserve force would shrink under the plan. Currently Freedom has 19 reserves and Watsonville has 40. The chiefs proposed establishing a reserve force of 40 for both Watsonville and Freedom, allowing the decrease to occur by attrition.

Three separate studies going back to the early 1970s have recommended

consolidating South County fire districts, and consolidation arrangements have occurred throughout the state. Recently Aptos and La Selva Beach combined departments. Soquel and Live Oak became Central County Fire in 1984.

Last night, Central County Fire Chief Steve Negro backed the plan, citing his own experience.

"We're able to provide better protection for the people we serve and for our employees," he said.

Regarding drawing the Salsipuedes district into an eventual consolidation, Watsonville Chief Smith said he and Evans are purposely moving slowly to better assure success.

"When you bite off too big of a chunk too fast, it's suicidal," he said.