

Local

City fire department 'stretched to limit'

By MARK BERGSTROM
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SANTA CRUZ — The city has so badly outgrown its fire department that neighboring departments must be called in to put out the fires.

The city mans three fire engines, the same number it did in 1965, when the city's population was under 20,000. In 1965, the city employed 38 firefighters. Today it employs 37.

Not only has the population almost doubled in the last 25 years, but the number of emergency calls handled by the Fire Department has increased more than 500 percent.

Fire Department statistics show 1,000 emergency responses in 1970 compared to 5,000 in 1990.

"In our opinion, it's a dangerous situation," said Capt. Jerry Ochoa. "If we didn't have mutual aid, Santa Cruz would probably be in rubble from fires having gotten away from us," Ochoa said. Because the calls for help force neighboring departments to call back firefighters on overtime to fill in while their on-duty crews are in Santa Cruz, there is a financial impact on taxpayers outside the city.

Central Fire Chief Steve Negro said it cost his district \$3,000 to help Santa Cruz fight the ice house and St. George Hotel fires last year. His department was called into Santa Cruz a total of 28 times. "The cost was substantial," Negro said.

The growing number of responses forced Negro in 1989 to say he could no longer provide two engines to the city when the city called for a second alarm. At that time, Scotts Valley sent one engine and Central two. "We were committing half of our resources," explained Negro. "That made me nervous because my bottom line is keeping my own district protected," Negro said.

Now Scotts Valley, Central and Aptos/LaSelva each send one engine to the city on a second alarm.

Like Negro, Aptos/LaSelva Chief Chuck Mornard says fire departments are happy to help each other, because no fire department can ever be big enough to handle anything that could conceivably happen.

"We're happy to do it, because we may need them, too," Mornard said.

Truth is they do, but not nearly as often.

Central Fire, for example, aided Aptos/La Selva on three second alarms in 1989. And Santa Cruz helped Central once.

Santa Cruz Fire Chief Ed Ekers is more reserved in his assessment

engine of the three on-duty engines is available to go to a house or building fire.

"We can get there, but one engine company can't do a lot of work on a fire. It's the third, fourth and fifth engines that make you effective," Ekers said. And he has to call for a second alarm.

In addition to not being able to handle substantial structure fires, the Fire Department is beginning to feel the pinch on medical-emergency calls, which make up about

60 percent of its runs.

"Many times we have three calls in a row and all of our equipment is committed," Ekers said.

When a fourth call comes in, the department either has to try to free up one of the already-committed engines or call Scotts Valley or Central for help. "There have been times when we were on small fires and we'd just disconnect our hoses and abandon them so we could go on to the next call," Ekers said.

Santa Cruz needs a fourth engine

company, Ekers said. And, as he sees plans for new and taller buildings on Pacific Avenue, Ekers sees the need for an aerial-ladder company, too.

That would mean 15-17 additional firefighters.

Since staffing increases must come in increments of engine companies (12 firefighters), the cost is extremely expensive, said Dick Wilson, who has been city manager for the past 10 years.

He said he is in "complete agree-

ment" that the Fire Department is undermanned.

Why, then has the situation been neglected?

"It's purely a matter of what the city can afford," Wilson said. "Our job has become to manage deficiencies," Wilson said, and there are deficiencies in all city departments, from parks and recreation to streets. "I think it's clear that we need to — if at all possible — make additions to the fire department and, absent the earthquake, I

think we would have begun already," Wilson said.

"We'll have to see what next year's budget looks like, but I think it will be lean," Wilson said.

Fire Capt. Ochoa points his finger at the City Council. "I hate to blame the City Council, but for a long time we've felt the city budget has been balanced on the back of the fire department," he said.

He said he can't believe that the city councils through the years did not know what they were doing.

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Santa Cruz Fire Chief Ed Ekers is more reserved in his assessment of the dangerousness of the problem than are some of his firefighters.

"I don't want the community to think there's a crisis, because there's not," Ekers said. He defines the problem as being "stretched to the limit."

The department still is able to reach the scene of an emergency within 4 minutes of the time it receives the alarm. But because of the volume of calls, often only one