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Free dispute leads to end of fire service

By LANE WALLACE FEB 4 1993
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A dispute with Santa Cruz County over money has prompted the Freedom Fire District to stop providing initial response to emergency calls in the Larkin Valley-Calabasas Road area. The decision means first response will be provided by the state Department of Forestry's

Corralitos station, which cannot get to most parts of the 5.5-square mile area as quickly as Freedom does, Fire Chief Ben Evans said this morning. The county contracts with Forestry for the service. The switch is effective March 1, said Evans, adding that Freedom firefighters will still provide mutual aid to the area when re-

quested. "Pure frustration" with the County Administrative Office over stalled negotiations led the fire board's decision last month to cut the service, Evans said. The fire district had been providing first response to the area under a contract with the county for 10 years but wasn't happy with the amount. The fire district could get more

money by annexing the area, but the administration has stonewalled the district's efforts to schedule an election, Evans said. The administration must work out a "tax exchange resolution," then send it on to the Board of Supervisors for action. Administration officials have had the issue before them for more than a year and failed to take that

step, Evans said. But Pat Busch, an analyst for the county administrative office, tells a different story, and says the staff is not opposed to an annexation election. Because the state was late in approving its budget, Busch said, exact tax rates haven't been worked out. "We're not exactly sure what the tax distribution will

be," he said. "There are significant technical issues." The county wants to know the distribution before approving the tax exchange resolution, Busch said. Since the contract with the county expired last July, Evans said, Freedom continued to provide initial response in Larkin Valley. See FIRE / back of section ▶

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ey-Calabasas but found it financially difficult. The district voluntarily dropped the contract last July, anticipating an election in November.

"We can't afford to provide it for free," Evans said. The district's action comes at a time when all government agencies are financially strapped and are fighting over smaller amounts of money than they did in better times.

The county's payment to the Freedom district gradually rose from \$7,500 to \$24,000 a year for the 400-home area.

Evans said he researched the tax rolls several years ago and found the county was collecting about \$38,000 in taxes earmarked for fire protection, plus about \$30,000 in fees from a "county service area."

The district wants that money, Evans said, and would be entitled to it by annexing. Freedom tried an annexation election once before, in July 1989. A two-thirds vote of residents was needed; 57 percent favored it.

In talking to residents since, Evans said, some were under the false impression that a proposed \$60 per parcel fire-protection fee would have been in addition to the

county service area fee, then \$70 and now \$73.50. The CSA fee would have been dropped if the annexation had gone through, Evans said.

Before the election, the fire district had to file an application with the Local Agency Formation Commission. It then went to the County Administrative Office for the tax exchange resolution, then to the Board of Supervisors, then back to LAFCO to set an election. All those steps went through with no problem in 1989, Evans said.

Evans said the district would resume first response if the county agreed to give the \$38,000 in fire taxes, even without the \$60 monthly fee. That could be done by county supervisors without a vote of the people, and the fire district could later seek an election to get the \$60, Evans said.

Part of the \$60 could be used to buy a truck that would carry 2,000 gallons of water, Evans said. There's not much need for such a truck in central Freedom, where there are hydrants, but would be useful in Larkin Valley where most homes have well water.

Evans wrote to all supervisors last week and received calls from Walt Symons and Fred Keeley yesterday. Symons said he plans to meet with Supervisor Ray Belgard and administrators about the issue.

FEB. 4 1993