

# Hill residents seek answers to fire protection woes

About 40 people turned out last Wednesday night for a meeting held to discuss fire protection and water problems residents in the Redwood Drive area in the hills above Aptos are facing.

Residents met with County Supervisor Robley Levy, State Forest Ranger Bob Voss, County Fire Marshal Mel Angel, representatives of the Aptos Fire District and other county officials to discuss the ways and cost of improving fire protection in the remote, hilly residential area north of Camp Monte Toyon.

The meeting was prompted by a fire last September that destroyed two homes at the end of Redwood Drive, and then spread into brush and timber before firemen from Aptos and the California Department of Forestry could put the blaze out.

It took the first truck to arrive 19 minutes to get

there after the first report was received in the County Communications Center, and some residents were already beginning to evacuate from the area.

One home was engulfed in flames when the first truck from Aptos arrived, and firemen from both departments were hampered in their fire-fighting efforts by lack of water, officials said.

The area is outside the Aptos fire district and is served by the California Division of Forestry (CDF) under a contract with the county. Aptos firemen responded to that fire at the request of the state firemen.

Nicki Pecchenino, Mrs. Levy's administrative aide, said that those at the meeting expressed interest in annexing to the Aptos fire district, believing they would receive faster service than they now get from the Division of For-

estry units stationed in Corralitos.

Fire district officials opposed the annexation. Assistant Chief Al Forbes said after the meeting that the department's response time to the fire at the end of Redwood Drive was 19½ minutes.

"With that response time involved, and enough water, we might be able to protect the neighbors' houses," Forbes said. But time would be against the department being able to save the first house involved in a fire.

Fire district officials at the meeting cited a 1978 study done by then-Chief Richard Chinn and (now) Chief Nick Baumgartner which concluded the only feasible way to provide speedy fire protection in the area would be to form a volunteer fire company under the supervision of the fire district, and to station a fire engine at the top of

the hill.

At that time, the cost of that protection would have been equal to another 98 cents per \$100 assessed valuation on the pre-Prop. 13 property tax roll.

Forbes recommended last week that residents consider the installation of sprinkler systems in their homes. Based on studies elsewhere, that would cost about \$1,000 per house, he said, and would slow or halt the spread of fire until fireman arrived.

"But if they are looking for the degree of protection provided in the urban area," Forbes added, "that protection is not available at any cost.

"The reasons are response time and water," he said.

Resident could also install smoke detectors in their homes, and if connected into a central alarm station as required in the remoter, water-deficient

areas of the Aptos fire protection district, this would provide early warning of a fire.

To solve the problem of lack of water, some residents suggested annexing the private water company now owned by James Cavanaugh to the Soquel Creek County Water District.

To do so, the residents would have to form an assessment district, buy the water system from Cavanaugh, improve it to the Soquel Creek district standards, then turn it over to Soquel Creek to operate.

Soquel Creek board chairman Ken Izant advised against it, saying the cost would be exorbitant.

Ms. Pecchenino said the other option was for Cavanaugh to improve his existing water system. Cavanaugh is now locked in a dispute with county planners over his construction

of water storage tanks without county permits, and plans for the construction of more homes if the water system is expanded.

Cavanaugh is presently prohibited by the California Public Utilities Commission from connecting more homes to the system until he improves it. Residents want the system improved, but have opposed the idea of Cavanaugh building more homes in the area.

As an outgrowth of the meeting, residents will invite CDF officials to meet with homeowners in the area, and schedule fire prevention inspections of the homes. They will also consider buying an old fire hose from either Aptos or the CDF so that neighbors can start fighting fires before regular firemen arrive.

County officials are already working on the formation of a County Service Area that would provide

money for county road crews to maintain Redwood Drive.

And Local Agency Formation Commission Executive Officer Pat McCormick will be asked to work with a committee of 10 or so Redwood Drive residents on a study of how fire protection can be improved in the area. The study is expected to be completed by March.

Mrs. Levy said after the meeting that the problems faced by the Redwood Drive residents are indica-

tive of the situation through much of the rural Santa Cruz County area.

"We are coping with the results of past land use decisions," she said, which allowed urban-type residential development in rural areas.

"People are really suffering now for the decisions the county made in the past. The way the county has of dealing with this is to make sure an area has adequate services before starting development," she added.