

Fire merger summit fizzles

By BOB SMITH

It was supposed to be something of a "summit" meeting Thursday night between the Capitola City Council and the Capitola Fire Protection District directors.

All of the Capitola City Councilmembers appeared, apparently ready to talk about the possibility of merging the independent fire district into the city government.

But when the meeting finally started, two of the Capitola fire board members, Richard Mendonca and Max Kludt, were absent and fire director Wayne Fontes confessed to the council that they were boycotting the session.

Fontes originally persuaded a skeptical council that it should meet with the fire board one more time and discuss a city takeover of the district, saying that three of the five fire directors wanted to come into the city.

But as the meeting opened, it became apparent that only Fontes and director Lane Lawson were committed to having the fire department become part of the city government.

The third director at the City Council meeting was Gene Warren and he made it clear repeatedly that he would not make any commitment to the council at last week's session, and had to be convinced that the city was financially able to take over the fire district and that none of the present fire district employees would lose their jobs or be demoted as the result of a takeover.

As the scenario unfolded, the council was told that the Capi-

tola fire board is, in effect, shopping for the best deal in a merger. He said the city and the Central Santa Cruz County Fire District were being asked to bid on the Capitola district.

Fire board members are being heavily lobbied by district employees to extract some promises from the city or the Central Fire District that their jobs will be secure.

Fire Capt. Charlie Howard said the Capitola firefighters are split over proposals to join either the city or Central. "Firefighters are split 50-50 on going one way or the other. There are a lot of fears and concerns," Howard told the council.

Later Howard elaborated that the "fear" he referred to was the "fear of the uncertainty of going with the city."

The firefighters, Howard said, want to see improved fire protection for the city, especially the large buildings in the 41st Avenue area.

"Central County has shown us that there would be be two first-in fully manned engines on any scene (fire) and two engines in reserve."

Capitola now is able to send two engines to a structure fire but can place just two firefighters on each piece of apparatus.

"As firefighters, we want what is best for our community," Howard said. "We don't fear change. We know there has to be change but we want to give the people the best protection they can get."

Personally, Howard added, "I believe in the city but if we go in that direction, I want to see improvements in the fire protection.

The Capitola Fire District was invited at one time to join Live Oak and Soquel fire districts in forming the Central district, but Capitola pulled out early in those talks.

Several meetings have been held with the Capitola City Council over the past five years, and several staff and consultant studies have been done on a possible merger with the city.

But the district has always refused to support a merger or city takeover of the fire district.

A majority of the City Council indicated Thursday night that their patience with the fire board was now running short.

"Will the three directors sitting here make a commitment to go to the city?" asked Mayor Michael Routh.

"If not, I don't want to sit through the bullshit," the mayor said. "I know where I am," Fontes said. "We are authorized to come up with something after completing a study."

"I won't commit our staff time," Routh retorted, "unless we have some sort of conceptual commitment from the fire district."

Lawson seemed to agree with Fontes that he wanted to join the city.

The stumbling block was placed by fire director Gene Warren.

"Myself making a commitment is going against what I'm looking for," Warren told the council. "But I can see your point of view if we are wasting your time. But I made a commitment to the other board members (Mendonca and

Kludt) I'm representing to come here as a fact-finder and then go back to them.

"For me to say I have decided to 'go city' tonight would be foolish," Warren added.

Warren wanted the city to fill out a 13-item questionnaire before he would make a decision.

"Someone has to convince me that the city is the way to go," Warren said.

"Do you feel that I'm dragging my feet?" Warren asked at one point.

"Yes," said Routh. "There is nothing wrong with asking questions but there has to be some commitment from you before we commit our staff time."

The council finally agreed to have City Manager Steve Burrell answer the district's questions but they also made it clear that they wanted a decision one way or the other soon.

"You've got three choices," Councilman Jerry Clarke told the fire directors, "status quo, merger with Central Fire or merger with the city."

"We want the fire district to become part of the city and all we are waiting for is a commitment by the fire district," Routh added.

"It's the idea that is the first step," Councilman Dennis Beltram added, "but you are saying that the numbers (the details) are the most important issue."

"Are we going to a be a fiscal burden?" Fontes asked.

"We wouldn't be here tonight if we couldn't afford you folks," Councilman Bob Bucher retorted. Warren, who

is the "swing vote" on the issue, finally promised to give the City Council his decision on the merger "one week after our next fire board meeting."

The council told Warren to give them a call if he decides to join the city. "But don't call us if you decide to go with Central," Warren was told by Bucher.