

Merger brings improvement to mid-county fire protection

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LIVE OAK — There are few outward signs of the Central Fire Agency, even though it's now a full year old.

The fire engines still are red and adorned with either "Live Oak" or "Soquel" in fancy, gold-leaf lettering.

It's only when those engines are side by side, pumping water on a fire that the agency's role is visible.

The agency's low profile belies some significant improvements in fire protection in the two communities it serves.

Rather than re-lettering the Live Oak and Soquel engines and erecting signs in front of the three firehouses, directors, chief officers and captains have been at work standardizing hose and equipment on those engines, rewriting training manuals and improving responses to emergencies.

The result is that now the 24 paid

firefighters and 40 volunteers attack fires the same way, despite the different insignia on their uniforms.

Central County Fire is the result of 10 years of talks between directors of the Soquel and Live Oak fire districts, attempting to keep pace with the tremendous growth and sociological changes of the two communities.

The decision to merge operations was given the necessary push in 1981 when both districts faced the retirements of their long-time chiefs and uncertain finances brought on by Proposition 13.

Capitola Fire District also was about to see its longtime chief retire and it, too, faced financial uncertainty. Directors from that district participated in discussions of what at first was to be the merger of all three mid-county departments. But, Capitola decided not to become part of Central and pursue, instead, some kind of arrangement with the city of

Capitola. So far, they haven't accomplished that.

Central Fire officials see the new agency as the most cost-effective means of providing fire protection and emergency medical responses given today's shrinking money.

Soquel and Live Oak directors stopped short of total consolidation, the ultimate goal. Instead, they signed an agreement and appointed a joint board of directors to administer the two departments. Each district retained its own property and equipment, but turned over its operating funds to the new board of directors. Chairman of the joint board is Ron Pederson of Live Oak.

The agency has realized some cost savings by consolidating administration under Chief Harry Rowe and Assistant Chiefs Steve Negro and Doug Schmidt. They are now working on a joint insurance policy for the two districts to trim costs

there.

"We're saving a little bit here and there," says Rowe. But, explains Negro, the new agency from the start never expected to save great sums of money. "The big expectation was to take the dollars we (Soquel and Live Oak) got and use them as efficiently as possible to provide the best possible fire protection."

Both Live Oak and Soquel departments were begun in the middle-to-late 1940s, in days when people lived and worked in their neighborhoods and would throw off their aprons in the hardware or grocery stores or run from the chicken coop when the fire siren blew to announce a fire in their community.

In the past 20 years, Live Oak and Soquel became bedroom communities and small stores were overshadowed by large shopping complexes. Fewer volunteers were around during the day to answer calls as the job market centralized in

Santa Cruz, San Jose and then Scotts Valley. Live Oak Fire was forced to hire more and more paid firemen to handle the daytime calls.

Just before the merger, Soquel had hired four paid firefighters because it, too, could no longer assure adequate manpower while its menfolk were away at work. The department answered more than 600 calls in 1981.

Development of Cabrillo College, and the Capitola Mall and K-mart shopping centers on 41st Avenue brought structures too large to be protected by the resources of just one fire department so Live Oak, Soquel, Capitola and Aptos entered into mutual aid agreements whereby one department could call another for help on a fire it could not control. Late in the 1970s, the departments upgraded those agreements with a plan for the automatic response of more than one department to selected large structures, such as the Capitola Mall.

Those agreements showed the effectiveness of working together to accomplish what could not be done individually. Yet, says Ken Izant, Soquel Fire director for more than 30 years, mutual aid was not the ultimate answer. "The problem was that firemen from one department didn't know each other's equipment and procedures."

Today, Soquel's engines still are stationed downtown Soquel and Live Oak's are at its two stations on Thurber Lane and 17th Avenue. But, they are all "loaded" with hose identically and respond in combination to fires anywhere within the joint boundaries of the new agency.

Prior to the merger, both departments

initially were able to dispatch two engines to a house or building fire. Now, standard procedure calls for the agency to respond three engines to any structure fires.

Combined, the Soquel and Live Oak stations are expected to roll on some 2,000 calls this year.

In addition to better response to fires, having three stations for the two communities allows the agency to move its engine companies around and take one out of service for training, says agency Fire Chief Harry Rowe. "Before, we were hesitant to pull an engine company out of its area for training," says Rowe.

The eventual goal of the agency is total consolidation of the two departments, which would standardize the working hours of the Soquel firefighters, who currently work longer hours than those at the Live Oak stations, and consolidate the Soquel and Thurber Lane firehouses to more cost-effectively serve the Soquel to Dominican Hospital area.

First, however, Central County Fire, like the rest of the fire districts in the county and state, needs a sense of financial security. Since passage of Proposition 13, fire districts have been funded by different formulas, with no guarantee the present funding method will continue.

"We're looking for a permanent means of funding we can depend on for planning fire service in our area," says Rowe. "If we could plan from year to year rather than month to month, we'd be consolidated now."

Much of the energy of the new agency has been directed toward finances this past first year. "I wish that energy could have gone toward meeting our goals," Rowe explains.



Pete Amos/Sentinel

Leonard Negro and Jeff Dorrell of Soquel station plan training drill with Paul Virsaitis and Bill Creed of Live Oak