

# Fire chiefs push unification proposal

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Before they start talking about the proposed unification of fire protection services, Freedom Fire Chief Ben Evans and Watsonville Fire Chief Gary Smith like to show visitors a videotape of firemen in action.

The tape, with the elapsed time superimposed, shows how long it takes firefighters to get water into a burning house.

It takes one firefighter 4 minutes, 20 seconds from the time he arrives and starts hooking up the hoses until he's got the hose into the house. With two firefighters, it's 2:59. With three, the time drops to 2:09. With four, it's 1:47.

The chiefs are pushing that quicker response time as the key reason for the proposed unification of services.

Watsonville's Station 2, on Airport Boulevard, now has two firemen on duty from a third to half the time, and three the rest of the time.

The Freedom Fire District station, four-tenths of a mile away at Freedom and Airport boulevards, has two firefighters on duty 40 hours a week and one the remainder of the time.

"I'm very uncomfortable when we only have two people on duty at Station 2," Smith said.

If the unification of services is approved, Station 2 will have four firefighters 40 to 50 percent of the time and three the remainder.

"With four people your attack strength is really beefed up," Smith said. That's especially important, he believes, because there's a lot of industrial development near Station 2. Fires at industrial facilities usually require more manpower than a house fire.

If there is a unification of services, the Freedom station would be closed.

Some people are calling the plan a merger, but that's not the case, Smith and Evans emphasized.

"The Freedom Fire District will continue to exist," Smith said. The district would be contracting with the city of Watsonville for fire services.

Freedom has a budget of about \$300,000 annually. The contract would cost the Freedom district about \$275,000. It would be up to Freedom directors to decide what to do with the rest. They wouldn't have to spend the excess money every year, but could let it build up, Smith said.

Unification "won't cost anybody any more money," Evans said.

The Freedom station would be closed, and Freedom's paid firefighters and reserves would

be assimilated into the Watsonville Fire Department.

But there would still be a Freedom Fire District Board of Directors, which would have to approve the contract from year to year with Watsonville. Directors would be able to negotiate changes, or pull out entirely if they didn't like the way Watsonville was doing things.

"It happened in Pajaro," Smith said. For 50 years, the Pajaro Fire District contracted with the Watsonville Fire Department. But several years ago, Pajaro got an offer from the North Monterey County Fire District and decided to switch.

The idea of unifying services has been discussed several times in the past, but was always rejected or dropped. Evans and Smith revived the idea last year and brought it to the City Council and Freedom's fire board.

They got the OK to draw up a proposal, which was completed two months ago. In December, the Freedom board agreed to enter negotiations.

Smith and Evans are drawing up a contract, scheduled to be presented to the Freedom board Feb. 18. The contract would call for a one- or two-year trial of the unification.

The plan calls for Freedom's four paid firefighters to become part of the Watsonville force, at

Watsonville pay scales, and for its 20 reserves to receive the same pay as Watsonville's 40 reserves. When resignations bring the total reserve roster down to 40, it would be held there.

There's an intangible element in the question of unification, too: politics.

"We're the only government agency in Freedom," Evans noted. "We're sort of a focal point." The fire station not only gets calls about fires, but about every governmental problem imaginable.

Evans acknowledges there's some feeling in the community that unification would take away a part of Freedom.

"I imagine we'd lose a few reserves" if the fire agencies unify, he said.

Smith is aware of the Freedom identity question, and he's willing to make allowances in the contract. He said he wouldn't be opposed to such things as Freedom reserves continuing to identify themselves as such.

Smith doesn't have the final say about what the contract can include — that's up to the City Council. But before the council considers the matter, it goes to the Freedom board. If that three-member group rejects the unification, it's a dead issue.

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REFERENCE