

Mid-County fire districts mull merger

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Fire chiefs of several Mid-County fire departments are considering a merger, a consolidation effort that has been sparked by fears if they don't do it, dollar-hungry state legislators will.

Chiefs of Aptos/La Selva, Central and Scotts Valley fire districts this week will ask their respective boards to prepare a preliminary consolidation study, according to Chuck Mornard, Aptos/La Selva chief. Branciforte Fire District may also join in the study, he said.

If the boards agree, as expected, the fire departments will study the benefits of consolidating staff, equipment, budgets and stations into one district, said Mornard.

The possible Mid-County merger parallels consolidation talks in south county to

join the departments of Salsipuedes, Freedom, Watsonville and the Santa Cruz County fire area south of the Aptos/La Selva district's jurisdiction.

Both mergers, said Mornard, have been prompted by suspicions that there is an underlying push by legislators for mass consolidation of special districts, like fire districts, across the state.

The departments would rather plan the consolidations themselves than be forced into it, said Mornard.

"The potential exists for county officials and LAFCO to be in the position to dictate how and when consolidation will occur with minimal input from the affected districts," according to a memo the chiefs wrote following an organizational meeting last week.

By taking action themselves, the chiefs

hope to dictate the terms of consolidation, said the memo.

Three state actions have fueled the chiefs' consolidation suspicions.

A bill, SB844, would allow local agency formation commissions (LAFCOs) the power to initiate consolidations, a step up from their current power to approve or reject mergers.

At the same time, state budget proposals have included property tax shifts ranging from 25 to 100 percent of the so-called special district augmentation funds that finance fire districts, said Mornard. Those funds would be shifted to schools, thus reducing the state's shortfall in funding education.

Boards of supervisors would then be given full discretionary power to allocate the remaining property tax revenues from

a "superpot." The superpot could replace a contract presently used to distribute revenue.

In an inter-agency meeting held last week, chiefs of the Mid-County departments said they believe the fire districts would be a major target of consolidation for LAFCO and the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors, even if the districts didn't initiate the merger.

While such a merger makes sense economically and logistically, Mornard said the fire departments want to call the shots.

"We're not sure how much input we'd be allowed to give in a process like that," he said.

Representatives of the districts agreed to ask their boards to participate in a "fairly comprehensive" feasibility study,

said Mornard. Central and Aptos/La Selva boards of directors are scheduled to consider the request tonight. Scotts Valley directors will consider the request on Wednesday. On Thursday, the three chiefs will discuss the outcome, according to Mornard.

The three Mid-County districts have combined budgets of about \$12.5 million. Aptos/La Selva fire district covers 24 square miles, has 43 full-time employees and a \$4 million budget. Central Fire District encompasses 30 square miles, has 48 full-time employees and a \$5 million budget. Scotts Valley covers 22 square miles, has a budget of \$3.2 million and 32 employees. Branciforte has three employees, a \$265,000 budget and encompasses 16 square miles, said Mornard.

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