

TOP FIRES & FIRE PROTECTION

# Cool reception for fire-district merger scheme

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A study on merging four Santa Cruz County fire districts into a single district received a cool reception last night from Aptos-La Selva fire directors.

The district, together with the Central, Scotts Valley and Branciforte fire districts, had paid a Sacramento-based consultant to look at the feasibility of consolidating the four districts into one or, as an alternative, merging just Central, Scotts Valley and Branciforte into a single district.

Aptos-La Selva directors "reluctantly" agreed to participate in the study, which was a follow-up to an in-house study conducted by the staffs of the four fire districts last year. Several directors, however, had made it clear that they didn't like the idea even before the study.

The consultants, Ralph Anderson and Associates, concluded that a four-district merger would save \$600,000 but, at the same time, cost 11 persons their jobs.

A three-district merger would actually cost \$158,000 more than they now spend individually because more personnel would have to be hired.

Much of the savings would come at the expense of the Aptos-La Selva district.

The La Selva Beach station would be converted to an all-volunteer operation. It is now manned by a captain and a fire-

fighter.

The other two stations — Rio del Mar and the Soquel Drive station in front of Mar Vista School — would be manned by a captain and two firefighters each.

In all, Aptos-La Selva fire Chief Chuck Mornard said, the on-duty staffing in the district would be cut from between eight and 10 firefighters daily to six.

The consultants also recommend that the Soquel Village station in the Central Fire District, which handles about 700 calls a year, be converted to a paid-call (volunteer) operation and two full-time firefighters be stationed in the remote Branciforte fire station.

The administrative headquarters would be located in the present Aptos-La Selva headquarters, next to the Soquel Drive fire station.

But most of the operational command would be centered in the Central Fire District, with a battalion chief (who would take command at major fires) headquartered at the 17th Avenue station along with a three-person engine company and a three-person truck company.

If a four-district merger went through, three fire chiefs, two deputy chiefs, five battalion chiefs, two captains, 10 firefighters, one fire marshal and one fire inspector-captain would lose their positions or be demoted.

But to set up the new organization with paramedic-manned fire

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engines in every full-time fire station in the district with the exception of Branciforte, nine paramedic firefighters would have to be trained from existing personnel or hired fresh, plus a division chief and a deputy fire marshal.

The four Aptos-La Selva directors were generally unhappy with the report's conclusions, Mornard said, because of the negative impact on the district.

"The big issue is that all our people are going somewhere else and all the savings are being realized in Aptos," Mornard said, summarizing the board's reaction.

The Soquel Drive station would have a heavier workload because it would be asked to cover the eastern portions of the Central district — an area now served by the Soquel station. The Rio del Mar station would cover La Selva Beach.

"It looked like it was not an improvement in the service levels," Mornard said, referring to the Aptos-La Selva area.