



Happy Valley still in uproar over fire department

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SANTA CRUZ — Fewer volunteer firefighters with the Branciforte Fire Department are turning out for emergency calls, apparently because of continued dissension in the department.

Chief Dale Thomas told fire district directors at a stormy meeting Thursday night that because fewer of the 17 volunteers are turning out, the new pumper, rather than the rescue squad, is being sent on medical emergency calls.

"Some of the volunteers have not been very dependable," Thomas told the board.

The department has been in turmoil since August when the board reorganized the department over the protest of most of the volunteers. The reorganization eliminated the position of Assistant Chief Gerry Gouin, the man the volunteers say was holding things together.

The question of using the pumper on medical calls was raised by volunteer Larry Shean, a supporter of Gouin.

Shean questioned the use of the pumper over the more-maneuverable rescue truck. Time, he warned, is of the essence, especially in heart attack cases.

Thomas says he elected to put the rescue equipment on the new pumper as an "interim measure" until two new captains, who have been hired to replace the assistant chief, begin work and some new volunteers can be recruited.

Thomas said after the meeting that only in the past year and a half had the district manned both a pumper and rescue squad and he said safety is not at risk by using the pumper on medical calls.

However, in response to a question by board member Fred Taylor, Thomas said only four of the 17 volunteers have been "checked out" on the new pumper. Again, he said the volunteers have failed to show up for that training.

One woman resident complained after Thursday night's often-nasty board meeting that Gouin was responsible for stirring up the volunteers and said the dissension in the department was now starting to threaten the safety of the residents of the district.

She also said Gouin's dismissal was his own doing.

Under the reorganization plan, directors in August said Gouin, who had been a

paid member of the department for 10 years, could apply for one of the new captain's jobs — and he did.

But, the board announced Thursday night he was not chosen. Instead, the jobs have gone to Mark Tregue of Felton, a Hollister firefighter, and Robert Stoops, a Branciforte volunteer and former Scotts Valley firefighter.

Stoops was one of six volunteers who did not protest the reorganization plan. The other thirteen signed a petition urging the board retain Gouin as assistant chief.

Gouin and his supporters claim the reorganization plan was a veiled means of getting rid of him. Thomas had tried to fire him last December.

Board Chairman Claude Bourne refused to explain why the former assistant chief was not deemed as qualified as the other applicants for a lower-ranking position.

Bourne threatened to shut off public comment at the meeting. Both he and Thomas refused to answer questions from the audience, saying the questions had been asked and answered at previous meetings and were being raised again only to antagonize the board.

"I'm a taxpayer," shouted Dick Standish, a volunteer who demanded a question be answered. "You're not a taxpayer, you're an agitator," shouted Thomas. The audience of some 20 persons was split in its opinion.

The turmoil in the department has

prompted a county grand jury investigation and turned a normally uncontested board of directions election in November into a wide-open slugfest.

Pat Reader announced Thursday night

that a forum for the seven persons vying for the three seats in the election will be held Oct. 27 at Happy Valley School. Only written questions will be accepted at the forum, she said, to "keep things civil."