

Aptos-La Selva fire board agrees to merger study

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Aptos-La Selva Fire District directors last night ended a 2½-year debate and decided to pursue a "fact-finding" study that might lead to consolidation with the Central Fire District, which serves Capitola, Soquel and Live Oak.

Directors voted unanimously to go ahead with the study after meeting for more than an hour with facilitator Bob Cardin.

But several directors stressed that they were not committing to a consolidation with the other Midcounty fire district — only gathering information to see if it is practical and cost-effective. Director Dave Mack pointedly said that no one should draw the conclusion that the fire board is committed to consolidation at this point in time.

Cardin was hired by the board at a cost of \$500 in an attempt to break the stalemate on the issue that has existed since the board first participated in a study of the

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possible consolidation of Aptos-La Selva, Central and the Scotts Valley and Branciforte districts. He took the board from a 3-2 stance in favor of going ahead with the study to a unanimous vote for it.

It is now up to the Central District directors to decide if they want to join the fact-finding study, which will be done largely by board members. The Central board will meet Tuesday night at the Capitola City Council chambers.

If they decide to participate, they have been invited to meet with the Aptos-La Selva board Aug. 25 at 7:30 p.m.

Central directors in the past have shown interest in setting up a joint powers authority with

Aptos-La Selva that would merge the two department's fire-prevention and inspection, purchasing and other administrative functions while keeping the two departments' firefighting operations independent.

When Cardin opened the session last night, directors Curtis Gabriel and Don Griffin indicated that they were opposed to the study, with Dave Mack, Ray Garcia and Daniel Cumstey indicating that they were in favor of going ahead with it — but not necessarily completing the consolidation.

Consolidation received some attention in the last couple of years with the state raiding special district treasuries to finance its own deficit spending and, now, by giving the Local Agency Formation

Commission the power to initiate consolidation studies among special districts, including fire-protection districts.

LAFCO executive officer Pat McCormick, who spoke to the board last month, reportedly said that the number of special districts in the state will probably be cut in half by the end of this decade in an effort to streamline local government.

Cardin, who met with the five directors individually before last night's meeting, outlined the issues he thought they were most concerned about:

Economics

- The cost benefit of a merger.
- Not subsidizing another district.
- The impact of the state fund-

ing crisis on special districts.

Service

● Paramedic capability. Aptos-La Selva offers fire department-based paramedic service; Central does not.

● Are there operational benefits to a merger?

Labor relations

● Will Aptos-La Selva jobs be protected?

● How will employees have input?

● How will the new fire chief be selected?

Political

● How does the electorate feel about the merger?

● Who would make up the new board?

● When might LAFCO order a consolidation, and with whom?

● How might we bring citizens into the process?

● Are the goals of the two districts compatible?

Mack, one of the new members of the board, played the role of consensus builder and deadlock breaker, telling the other board members that proceeding with a fact-finding study wouldn't commit the board to consolidation.

"I have no bias one way or the other while we study consolidation," Mack said. "We should evaluate it."

He said the district shouldn't just sit back and wait for someone else to force it into a merger that might not be best for the residents of the Aptos-La Selva Fire District, referring to the possibility that LAFCO might seek a consolidation with Pajaro Valley fire districts.

"If we don't do it," he said, referring to the study, "we lose our investment of the last 2 to 3 years."