

Volunteer firefighters become 'orphans'

By BOB SMITH
STAFF WRITER

If there's anyone unhappy about the changes now taking place in the La Selva Beach fire departments, it's the 15 or more volunteers who have, until now, been the heart and soul of that tiny community's fire protection.

One woman, Judith Dorosin, resigned from the volunteer force last week, reportedly feeling that there's little call for her skills as an emergency medical technician (EMT) since the La Selva fire station is being manned 24 hours a day by paid Aptos-La Selva firefighters; in addition, paramedic-firefighters are providing medical assistance to La Selva Beach from the Rio del Mar area.

Her resignation was accepted with regret by the Aptos-La Selva directors.

Other volunteers feel they have been pushed aside by the paid firefighters since they are no longer being called out to battle the "routine" house fire or go to the automobile accident or emergency medical call as they did before La Selva

merged its fire department (on a trial basis) with the full-time Aptos Fire Department.

"It's a very tricky, very touchy situation," acknowledges F.I. "Burly" Burlison, a member of the Aptos-La Selva joint powers authority board.

The JPA board agreed to meet with the La Selva volunteers next month.

In the meantime, the volunteers have put up their own candidate for one of the openings on the La Selva fire board in November.

"Yes, we are unhappy," said Mike Wilson, president of the volunteers and a five-year member of the volunteer fire department. He is the owner of El Patio Grocery store.

Wilson said the volunteers are backing Glenn Rogers. "We want a voice on the board," Wilson said.

"We were taking part before. We were the fire protection for La Selva Beach. Then Aptos comes in," he said.

"It's hard," agrees Al Forbes, Aptos-La Selva fire chief. "They built that department and now the big monster (Aptos) is taking it over."

Wilson said the volunteers don't like being excluded from most of the department's calls. "They had a structure fire (Monday, Sept. 2) on Spring Valley Road and it burns to the ground. We weren't called. A lot of us learned about it by reading about it in the newspapers the next day.

"It is hard to sit here as a volunteer and not have a say," Wilson added, conceding that he may not be speaking for all of the La Selva volunteers. "We are not really taking part in the whole picture."

"What the volunteers really want," Forbes told members of the JPA board of directors Tuesday night, "is to be paged out on all calls, but we have six (full-time paid firefighters) responding on structure fires and four on medical emergencies and auto accidents. There just isn't any need for more volunteers on most calls."

Fire departments in this county use radio pagers, activated by a series of special tones, to summon off-duty paid and volunteer firefighters to the scene of an emergency.

A combination of different tones can be used to call var-

ious groups. The Aptos-La Selva department uses an "all-call" tone to alert its off-duty firefighters when they're needed at a fire or other major emergency. The La Selva volunteers have a different series of tones and are not now routinely paged out as are the off-duty paid Aptos-La Selva firefighters.

Aptos-La Selva fire captains have been told, JPA board members were told last week, to call out the La Selva volunteers only when large numbers of firefighters are needed at a fire scene.

Wilson said the La Selva volunteers would like to be summoned on every call in the La Selva area. "You would get people more involved," Wilson said.

While Aptos-La Selva Assistant Fire Chief Al Kinslow told JPA board members that there were about 15 active volunteers, Wilson disputes that figure. "We had a roster of 24," Wilson said last week. Now we are down to six or seven who are willing to get involved.

"We had six calls a week, now we get no calls," Wilson continued. "You have to have

calls to have people interested in training."

Forbes has said publicly in the past that he would like to phase out the volunteers (with the exception of the surf rescue team).

"When Forbes says he doesn't expect to see any volunteers in a year, it is hard to have some enthusiasm," Wilson said.

Aptos-La Selva Fire Captain Pat DiSimone said three volunteers turned out for a training session last Tuesday and one showed up at the end of the session. DiSimone carries 11 volunteers on his roster.

The Central County Fire District, created by the merger of the Live Oak and Soquel districts several years ago, went through a similar problem when the all-volunteer station in Soquel was manned 24 hours a day by the new department's paid firefighters.

"There was a transitional period when the volunteers at the Soquel station dropped off little by little," Central Assistant Chief Steve Negro recalls. "When we put paid people in Soquel, it reduced the calls for

the volunteers."

Central has 20 active volunteers and is getting ready to recruit another 10 to bring its roster up to the 30 authorized by the district, Negro said. They drill once a month and are paged out along with the off-duty paid firefighters for all structure and wildland fires, Negro said. "The page-call (volunteers) respond to their assigned station and then we move them up if necessary," he said.

The Aptos-La Selva administration is aware of the problem.

"The only thing that will make them happy," Forbes told the board, "is to give them their fire department back. They resent the fact that paid firefighters are taking over the department they built. The only thing that will make them happy is to give them a truck and let them respond to all fires in La Selva Beach."

That might help.

Wilson recalls: "Last month, we had a drill scheduled and it was canceled because there was a fire. It was never made up. They had a fire but we weren't even called to help mop up."

REFERENCE