

UPDATES

✓ *Fire & Fire Protection*
by Mark Adams

Fire Districts Consider Joining Forces

The fire chiefs at Aptos/La Selva, Central, Branciforte and Scotts Valley fire districts are worried that the state may diminish local control of fire services, and they are banding together.

The boards of each district approved a plan in August to consider consolidating the four districts, thus making them large enough to withstand outside efforts to control fire protection.

Fire districts are independent, local entities.

"It was pretty much sparked by the political thinking in Sacramento," said Aptos/La Selva Fire Chief Chuck Monard. "When you look at the party platforms and legislation in Sacramento, it kind of gives you a sense of what's going to happen."

In the minutes of an August 6 meeting, between the chiefs and several fire board members, the group states: "By taking a proactive approach, the chiefs believe that the districts can dictate the service levels and [continue] programs that local governing officials... have established as being appropriate."

Three issues concern the chiefs:

- Senate Bill 844, proposed legislation from Sacramento,

would give the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) the power to initiate consolidation efforts. Under current law, LAFCO has authority to approve or disapprove mergers.

- Another proposal is to redirect Special District Augmentation Funds (SDAF) to schools. Fire districts could lose between 25 to 30 percent of SDAF, current proposals suggest.

- Finally, another proposal takes all special district monies and places them in a "superpot." The County Board of Supervisors would control the "superpot."

According to the minutes of the fire chiefs' meeting: "The 'Chiefs' are concerned that 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."

The chiefs also believe revenues could be shifted to other districts and county programs if the boards do not take action first, Monard said.

But before consolidating, the districts must conduct a feasibility study. If the benefits are few, LAFCO or the boards would reject the plan, he said.

"Consolidation is supposed to save money, not create bigger bureaucracies," commented Ron Pederson, a Central fire board director. "I'm going to stand back and wait and see



Central fire is one of four districts participating in a consolidation study. Central fire protects residents in Soquel, Live Oak, and Capitola.

[what the study shows]."

The "in-house" study could be completed by October or November. The chiefs said the study includes Aptos/La Selva, Central and Scotts Valley districts because each offers a similar level of service.

Branciforte, however, has a smaller revenue base—its staff consists of one paid fire fighter whereas the other districts operate full-engine fire companies.

Branciforte was included

because it connects Scotts Valley to the other districts, Monard explained. LAFCO would not approve the consolidation otherwise, he said.

A merger of the four districts would eliminate several administrative positions. The districts would also share specialized equipment. This saves money, Monard said.

"The major drawback we are dealing with here... is you are losing your identity [through consolidation]," Monard said.

It is also possible that consolidation could result in more costs, he noted.

According to Max Kludt, chairman of Central fire, "If [the study] proves it is not realistic, all of us would back off."

Consolidation is no stranger to Aptos/La Selva or Central. Each has consolidated once before—Central has consolidated twice. But the proposed merger of four districts is unprecedented, Monard said.

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