

Fire districts told to find own solutions

Fire districts in Santa Cruz County have been urged to "search for solutions" to the critical financial problems confronting them or face the prospect of having such solutions imposed on them.

That, in effect, is what directors of the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) suggested at their Wednesday meeting on the recommendation of their executive officer, Pat McCormick.

McCormick told the LAFCO board, which is charged with overseeing mergers among political subdivisions in the county, that the time is drawing near when the money sources upon which local fire districts are dependent for a considerable portion of their operating revenues will dry up.

"Most of the 18 fire agencies in the county rely on the (state's) Special District Augmentation Fund for substantial operating revenues," McCormick said, referring to the so-called "bail-out" money appropriated by the state legislature as a partial recompense for revenues lost by local agencies after the passage of Prop. 13.

"Over the last three years, the state's general fund surplus (from which bail-out funds were derived) has fallen from \$3.7 billion to nearly nothing," McCormick added, "and future funding is uncertain."

McCormick said the local fire districts had already cut budgets drastically and that "any future reduction in their budgets... could significantly affect the level of service provided by the existing system of independent agencies."

McCormick said he was not suggesting that LAFCO give the smaller districts the impression it was trying to order them around, but only to recommend that they jointly ponder what the future holds for them and what to do about it.

He noted that Monterey County "is approaching this problem by initiating a consolidation of several fire protection districts" and that in Santa Cruz County, "the Live Oak and Soquel districts have entered into a joint powers agreement to share administration, training and other operations."

He said other districts in the county might consider doing the same. "Other alternatives," he said, "include merging a fire district into a city, a district contracting for city fire protection" or outright mergers of smaller districts.

In any event, McCormick said, it would be wise for LAFCO to "encourage them to get working on it now and not when a solution may have to be mandated from above."

LAFCO Commissioner Bill Johnston, mayor of Watsonville and the city's representative on the commission, noted that he is also a member of the Freedom Fire Department and that that district is already engaged in discussions with the Salpuedes Fire District, and to a lesser extent with the Corralitos department, about a joint approach to the financial problems.

All the commissioners agreed that such joint discussions were eminently sensible and they adopted the resolution that urged all the fire districts to join in such talks.