

# Freedom Fire District rejects joining Watsonville

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FREEDOM — On a split vote, with strong feelings aired on both sides, Freedom fire commissioners Wednesday night voted 2-1 against joining forces with Watsonville's fire department.

A dejected Freedom Fire Chief Ben Evans said afterward, "I'm disappointed, but it's something I can't say I didn't expect.

"I'm not throwing anything away, though," he added, pointing to three large piles of documents he'd collected in support of the joint venture.

The board's decision to reject a contract with Watsonville is the fourth time in 11 years that a consolidation or joining of the two fire agencies has been defeated.

Fire Board Chairman Norm Craven, the most vocal critic of the latest proposal, said at the end of a two-hour meeting, "I honestly am not in favor of closing the Freedom fire station. If we close the doors on the station, we're slamming the door on Freedom residents. I'm very much opposed to closing the station."

He denied his decision was "political."

Craven was joined by Commissioner Bob Lee, who said, "There's not too much in here we aren't already doing. I'm not in favor of closing the station. It's a very efficient station and in a good location."

Evans took issue with the latter statement, saying the intersection of Freedom and Airport boulevards was very difficult to negotiate at peak commuter hours, when traffic is jammed in all four directions.

The only commissioner in support of the proposed contract was Chuck Barr, who said he felt better about the plan Wednesday night than

before. "This is a crossroads. We need to decide which way to go," he said.

The Freedom Fire Board has been mulling over the proposal to combine fire protection for five months, and each board meeting has been fraught with tension and opposing views. Up till Wednesday night, Lee had sided with Barr to pursue the matter.

In December, at a joint meeting with the Watsonville City Council and Freedom Fire Board, the council indicated its support of the plan, but voted to defer to Freedom.

Freedom Fire Chief Evans and

Watsonville Fire Chief Gary Smith spent almost six months drawing up a plan they felt would be palatable to both Freedom and Watsonville residents.

The bottom line for both fire chiefs was that the contract would mean Freedom would have more firefighters responding to structure fires in that area.

Freedom now operates with one man most of the time, but under the proposal, the Freedom station would close and its men would be stationed at Watsonville Station 2 on Airport Boulevard. In the event of a struc-

ture fire, a minimum of three men would respond, said Smith.

The safety factor for firemen was one reason Fire Commissioner Barr and secretary Phyllis Espindola, a former fire commissioner, endorsed the plan.

Also, three-fourths of Freedom's paid and volunteer firefighters supported it.

But Craven said the people of Freedom had worked too hard to finance the fire station to see it closed. The station is used by Boy Scouts, Little League and other community groups.