

Aptos board moves toward setting election for fire fee

APTOS — Fire district directors Tuesday night took a step toward a June special election for a proposed fire protection fee.

The fee is needed to maintain services at the current level, not add any revenues to the district.

The Fire Board unanimously adopted a resolution setting a public hearing on the issue in two weeks. The accompanying ordinance passed by directors included specific fees that would be charged.

Those fees are proposed to run between \$30 (small vacant parcels) to \$250 (large commercial buildings) a year. Residential units like single-family homes and condominiums would be charged \$75, while mobile home owners would pay \$35, as proposed.

Assistant Fire Chief Al Forbes described the fee as strictly based on the "benefit" of the user. An estimated 8,500 parcel owners would be affected.

The fee, he added, would not act as an increase of revenues for the fire district. It would only replace any anticipated deficits from cuts in state funding.

Fire Chief Nick Baumgartner has already said if his fire district loses special district money anticipated from the state in July, it would be necessary to close one of its two stations — probably the Rio del Mar station at 300 Bonita Drive. Even more critical would be the loss of its acclaimed paramedic emergency unit.

Forbes said the fire district received \$609,000 in special district fees last year. State officials have said there may be no money available for the next fiscal year and the Legislature has allowed special districts to ask their voters to approve benefit fees to supplement property tax receipts.

The district's proposed charges are based on the area receiving no state bailout in July. Forbes said if they were to receive some

money, the fee would be adjusted accordingly.

"If we receive half of what we got last year, our proposed fee would be cut in half," he said. "We will in no way be getting any more money than we had last year. We're only trying to maintain services we have now."

Directors discussed the possibility of not holding a special election and wait until the general election in November.

Forbes said, however, if they were to wait and the state bailout were not forthcoming, "we would be without funding for a year.

"The bottom line," he added, "was 'we can't wait.'"

A special election is expected to cost the district about \$20,000. It has only until March 1 to set up the election. Such a fee must be approved by two-thirds of the voters.

The public hearing will be held at 7:30 p.m. Feb. 22 at the district's main station on Soquel Drive.