

Capitola fire directors wonder where to turn next

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CAPITOLA — Another avenue to the future may have been closed to the Capitola Fire District.

For several years, fire district directors have been looking for a road to financial stability.

They have toyed with two: joining neighboring Central Fire District or becoming part of city government. The fire district now is a separate entity, encompassing an area slightly larger than the city limits. The district is governed by a five-member board of directors.

Last month, directors called off merger negotiations with neighboring Central Fire District.

The Capitola board said it liked what Central Fire had to offer. A

second engine company to respond to house fires. And, even more resources for bigger fires. All at no cost.

But, saying they feared a loss of local control, a majority of the directors said they believed the fire department would be better off under the city's umbrella. They voted to begin merger talks with the city.

Now the Capitola City Council has called off those talks.

Councilman Dennis Beltram canceled a meeting this week with fire district Directors Gene Warren and Wayne Fontes and Chief Jerry Bowles. City Manager Steve Burrell followed up Wednesday with a letter, saying the City Council is not interested in discussing the subject further unless the fire board is willing to relinquish all control by filing

a joint request with the city to reorganize the department as a subsidiary district under the city.

Fire district directors will consider their next move when they meet Monday night.

Burrell has told the City Council and the fire district that the only way to bring the fire department under city control is to form a subsidiary district.

That is the only way, he said, of keeping the present fire district boundaries (which exceed the city limits) and state funding. That funding, which this year amounts to about \$303,500, would be lost if the city were to make the fire department a municipal department or sign a joint powers agreement. The

city has a joint powers agreement with the Soquel Union School District to operate a community education and recreation program.

In deciding to pursue a merger with the city, the fire board said it would seek the same level of service as could be provided by joining Central Fire. The cost of staffing a second fire engine in the city is estimated at upwards to a half-million dollars a year.

Could the city contribute money to the subsidiary district? "Yes," says Burrell. Would the city contribute money? "The talks haven't gotten that far," Burrell says.

And, there will be no more talks unless the fire board agrees to let the City Council make that and all other

future decisions.

But fire district Chairman Max Kludt and Chief Jerry Bowles say "reading between the lines" of statements attributed to some city council members, they believe the city does not intend to put up the money needed to match the level of service offered by a merger with Central Fire.

"My thought has always been that the (fire district) board wants to enhance the department, not to regress. A merger with Central would be an enhancement. Forming a subsidiary district under the city would be regression," says Kludt, formerly Capitola's city manager.

He says he is not willing to merely

turn over control of the fire department to the city. "I don't think we (directors) were elected to give the fire district away. If we did, I would think we would be remiss in our duties."

Bowles says he hopes the issue can be put to rest Monday night. "I think everybody realizes something has to be done about the future. Now we have been through the steps of exploring what would be best."

In his mind, and in the mind of Kludt, what would be best would be consolidating with Central Fire District.

The board has been split 3-2 against such consolidation. Kludt says he hopes that with this latest news, the tide will turn.