

Fire plan bitterly opposed

By BUD O'BRIEN

The three independently governed South County fire districts made it clear today they don't want anybody telling them how to run their business.

Reacting to suggestions that the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) adopt a policy that would encourage the formation of a single fire protection agency for the entire south end of the county, spokesmen for the La Selva, Freedom and Salsipuedes fire districts spoke as one in their determination to preserve the autonomy of their districts.

At a specific issue before LAFCO this morning was proposals for adopting so-called spheres of influence for the three fire districts. State law gives LAFCO the authority to adopt such spheres of influence, which serve as guides to the ultimate expansion potential of individual districts.

But Pat McCormick, LAFCO's executive officer, recommended to the commission that instead of adopting separate spheres of influence for each district that it adopt a single sphere of influence for the entire South County — including the city of Watsonville. McCormick said while that would not directly affect the operation of the individual districts within the sphere, it would do away with individual spheres of influence for each district and encourage a move toward consolidation.

McCormick stressed his proposal — which was called "provocative" more than once during the discussion — imposed no operational restrictions on the individual districts because LAFCO has no such authority. He said that LAFCO's authority does not go beyond approving or disapproving annexations.

But McCormick presented the commission with statistics, and even some specific examples, designed to show that it would simply make sense, both financially and operationally, to consolidate the firefighting efforts of the area that runs from the eastern boundary of the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park to the Pajaro River, and from Monterey Bay to the Santa Clara County boundary at the summit of the Santa Cruz Mountains.

In addition to the three districts mentioned above, that area is served by the California Division of Forestry, County Service Area No. 4 (Pajaro Dunes Fire Protection), the Aptos Fire Protection District, and the city of Watsonville. The

county Board of Supervisors acts as the governing body of the service area and the areas that are the responsibility of the CDF.

The city of Watsonville — which has within its already-adopted sphere of influence much of Freedom and the College Road area now within the Salsipuedes district — has indicated its willingness to participate in efforts to increase cooperation among the various fire districts.

McCormick's examples if they're accurate, demonstrated a number of ways fire protection could be made more efficient at less cost, particularly in the areas served by the Freedom, Salsipuedes and Watsonville departments. McCormick stressed that his examples were just that, and that a number of other better alternatives might well be devised. He also stressed that there were ways aside from all-out merger — such as joint powers agreements and other contractual arrangements — to attain operational unity.

The most obvious example of overlapping services he cited was the existence of fire stations within a half-mile of each other on Airport Boulevard — one belonging to Freedom, the other to the city.

McCormick didn't ask the commission to approve his recommendation for a single sphere of influence this morning. Instead, he asked that action be delayed for a month, so his proposals and their supporting documentation could be absorbed by the various fire district personnel and the people served by them.

But the immediate reaction of the fire agencies was negative.

Said Roy Johnston of the La Selva district: "We're wholly opposed to making one sphere of influence...I don't want the La Selva district tampered with."

Johnston said if La Selva were ever to consolidate with anyone, it should be with Aptos, not the South County districts.

Phyllis Espindola and Norman Craven of the Freedom district also spoke disparagingly of McCormick's ideas. Both pointed out that a sphere of influence for the Freedom district had been formulated as long ago as 1977 and said it was time it was approved.

They both also blamed the fact that there were two fire stations within blocks of each other on Airport Boulevard on politics in the city of Watsonville.

"Freedom saved their money and worked hard and built their station," Espindola said, "then somebody got some political ideas and built that station two blocks (sic) away."

"That (station) was a mistake on their (Watsonville's) part," Craven agreed. "They know it, we know it. Why should Freedom be penalized for Watsonville's mistake?"

Bob Hiatt, chairman of the Salsipuedes board, was more subdued in his reaction, but stressed his board's firm belief that "we should have our own sphere of influence."

All of the spokesmen insisted there was already good cooperation among the fire districts.

But McCormick's voluminous documentation impressed the LAFCO members. Chairman Robley Lévy, one of the representatives of the county Board of Supervisors on LAFCO, noted at the outset of her remarks that LAFCO didn't really have the power to impose any policies on the various districts, aside from acting on annexation matters. So, she said, the information that had been discussed was less a matter of concern to LAFCO than it was "an enormous challenge to the fire districts."

She said fire protection efficiencies "can only be brought about by your agencies." She made it clear, though, that she believes those agencies, and the people they serve, should carefully consider the proposals and suggestions submitted by McCormick.

"I hope the districts will be looking very carefully at the proposals," she said, "not as something to be imposed — because it can't be imposed — but for what it does to focus all of our attention on our ability to provide the finest fire protection we can."

Gary Patton, another supervisory representative on LAFCO, agreed, saying McCormick's "innovative" recommendations should be carefully reviewed.

"If you could increase the amount of fire protection and save money," Patton said, "somebody should be working on that."

The commission unanimously approved McCormick's suggestion that action on the matter of spheres of influence be delayed at least until next month's meetings, at the same time instructing McCormick to make himself available to the various fire district boards to provide the details and documentation of his proposals.

WATSONVILLE REGISTER

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WATSONVILLE
REGISTER-PAJARONIAN
December 5, 1984