

# Fire protection fee campaign set

By BOB SMITH

Aptos fire directors will hold a meeting next Tuesday with representatives of the Aptos Chamber of Commerce and the area's homeowner associations to start planning for a June fire protection fee election. The meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m. at the main Aptos fire station.

Board members last week decided to ask the groups to nominate members to serve on the committee that will promote the passage of the fee proposal.

Fire chief Nick Baumgartner said last week morning that the district still has not decided how much to

charge homeowners and owners of vacant and business property if the fee is approved by two-thirds of the voters this June.

The state legislature, in the wake of Prop. 13, which drastically reduced the amount of property taxes available to special districts like fire districts in California, began using state tax dollars to augment or "bail out" the local districts.

But as the state surplus began dwindling, the legislature passed legislation allowing the special districts to ask their voters to approve benefit fees that supplement the property tax receipts.

Benefit fees are fixed fees (for example, \$75 a house per year, and other amounts for multiple residential and commercial buildings) that are collected each year with the property taxes.

Aptos officials began to seriously consider the benefit fee idea when the latest state fiscal crisis developed and state officials said there may be no money available next fiscal year for the special district bailout.

Baumgartner told the Rio del Mar Improvement Association directors earlier this month that if the district loses

the state bailout next July, the district's operating budget would be cut in half and the department would be forced to close one of its two stations — probably the Rio del Mar station at 300 Bonita Drive — and revert to just fire fighting, dropping its widely-acclaimed paramedic, emergency medical unit.

The board also settled the department's longstanding dispute with the California Department of Forestry over the use of the county's mutual aid pact in the forestry-protected areas around the Aptos fire protection district.

The board approved a new mutual aid contract with the department after CDF modified its operational orders to eliminate the major Aptos complaint that forestry firefighters were automatically requesting Aptos to respond to any major fire near the Aptos fire district before any forestry units were on the scene — a practice that runs contrary to normal mutual aid agreements.

Baumgartner said he and Assistant Chief Al Forbes had met with the new CDF Ranger, Dave Mack, before the meeting and believe the differences between the agencies can be resolved.