

# off the pad

## Some ideas about fires

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**Aptos Fire Chief Richard Chinn works out dispatching system with Margaret Perry, the county's chief dispatcher.**

By **BOB SMITH**

If I was a property owner in Aptos, I'd be pretty happy with Aptos Fire Chief Richard Chinn and the district's board of directors.

Two weeks ago, the fire department scrapped its independent communications system and contracted with the Santa Cruz County Communications center in Santa Cruz to provide emergency telephone answering and radio dispatching services.

Chinn claims the move will save the department about \$8,000 this year in salaries it would have had to pay night and weekend dispatchers.

But more important, the move is laying the groundwork for other departments to follow, and also for the 1978 changeover to the statewide 911 emergency telephone system.

I do live in Capitola and I'm not very happy because I don't see any signs of the local fire department moving in the same direction — a move that would make more men available in an emergency to the residents of the Capitola fire protection district.

Until the middle of the month, each fire department has the responsibility for independently providing communication services — manning its own phones, summoning volunteers if needed, dispatching emergency equipment, and manning its radios.

Fire departments have many and novel ways of solving their problems. As in Aptos, Live Oak utilizes a secretary during business hours, Monday through Friday, to handle the emergency phones and man the radio. At night and on the weekends, young men — "sleepers" — are hired to do the communications and, in Live Oak, some janitorial chores as well.

In Soquel, it's a community effort that centers around the Negro family. Brothers Ray and Ernie are the chief and assistant chief of the volunteer department and its only full-time paid employees. They have a phone system that rings simultaneously in the fire station and in their homes. In addition, there's another extension in the house used by some young volunteers.

In addition, each Negro home has an extension of the department's radio transmitter in it.

The system seems to work well, but it is predicated on someone always being home or at the fire station. In Soquel, it's hard to find the station uninhabited, but it does seem to put a hardship on the Negroes.

Capitola has a different system. Like the

city of Santa Cruz, the fire protection district commits a trained fireman to the communications slot, reducing the number of firemen on the "first-in" truck from three on duty to just two. It's been interesting sometimes to watch those two firemen try to do the work of twice their number at a major fire. Sometimes, it just isn't possible to do everything as fast as needed to save lives and property.

Live Oak Fire Chief Dick Pound says he's watching the Aptos test closely. If it works well, he'll make a recommendation to his directors to follow suit. The Santa Cruz fire department is also looking towards the county center as a way to free a trained fireman from his duties.

In Soquel, it seems that any move now would be a trade-off between the convenience afforded the Negro families offset by the additional equipment and cost of telephone lines from Santa Cruz to Soquel. Something will happen when 911 goes into operation, but it might be pleasant for the brothers to have a weekend together, away from those phones and radios.

The situation is different in Capitola. In conversations with Fire Chief Harold Jarvis, I have made two proposals. One would be a tie-in to the communications center in the basement of the county governmental center. He rejected that one.

A second proposal, also rejected by Jarvis, called for the department to continue answering most of its emergency calls and running its own radio. But when a structure fire or other call came in that required more than two men, all three on-duty firemen would respond. The police department's dispatchers — located across the street, would then answer the fire department's emergency lines and monitor the fire radio until volunteers or off-duty paid firemen arrived at the fire station. It requires the cooperation of two governmental agencies, and someone is going to spend a few dollars on the radio and telephone equipment. But I'd like to see three firemen on that first fire truck if my house or business was on fire.

Incidentally, the county isn't spending any more money for salaries now than it was last year. For years, the county has maintained a dispatcher on a radio console dedicated to fire, ambulance, and local government radio systems. Communications director Robert Gordon estimates five departments can be hooked up to the county system before a second fire dispatcher is needed.

Aptos does pay a small service charge for the dispatching service.

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