

# Fire districts face cutbacks in funding from the county

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Freedom Fire Chief Ben Evans groaned when he talked about the possibility that his district's already-slim budget might get slimmer.

A significant cut "would be devastating," said Evans, whose district runs on what he calls a "shoestring budget" of \$336,000. Freedom has five full-time firefighters.

What could reduce the budget of Freedom, and other small fire districts in the county, is a change in the money available from a fund called the "Special District Augmentation Fund," which the county Board of Supervisors parcels out. As an aftermath of Prop. 13, state law requires counties to devote a certain percentage of property taxes collected each year to that augmentation fund. However, there was nothing in the law compelling counties to parcel it all out to fire districts, and it has traditionally been doling out about 80 percent of it to the districts.

But now, relying on an appel-

late court decision in Sacramento, the two largest districts in the unincorporated parts of the county, Central and Aptos-La Selva, are claiming that they're entitled to 100 percent of their share of the augmentation fund.

If Aptos and La Selva get their full share, the amount available to other fire districts will drop from about \$820,000 to \$516,000, according to rough projections by Chuck Mornard, acting chief in Aptos-La Selva, and Steve Negro, chief at Central.

The court decision, based on a Sacramento case, only applies to fire districts consolidated since 1978; Aptos-La Selva and Central fall into that category. Freedom, obviously, doesn't.

Mornard said the district has received legal advice that it has no choice but to take the 100 percent allocation (\$730,000), instead of the currently allocated \$634,000.

"We don't want to impact the other districts, but we don't want to end up in a taxpayers' lawsuit," Mornard said.

Pat Busch, the County Admin-

istrative Office analyst who is working on the fund, disagrees. Central and Aptos-La Selva have the discretion to negotiate, he said.

Busch said he will be making a report on the issue to the Board of Supervisors in the next couple of weeks.

County Auditor-Controller Gary Knutson said that meanwhile, he will probably disburse the full share amount to the two large districts.

The rough figures drawn by Negro and Mornard show Freedom's allocation dropping from \$73,000 to \$46,000 and Salsipuedes' from \$80,000 to \$50,000.

Salsipuedes would be hurt by a loss of augmentation funds, but not as badly as Freedom, said Salsipuedes Chief Ron Hart. The district, he said, would have less money to set aside for needed capital improvements.

Hart and Evans said they aren't blaming the Central and Aptos districts. "I don't blame them one iota. I would take the 100 percent," Hart said.