

Aptos fire board rules out user fee plan for time being

By BOB SMITH

Feeling they will have enough money to operate this year, Aptos fire directors decided Tuesday night to postpone their election on a fire department user fee until at least next June.

The district originally planned to hold an election on the user fee idea in November.

User fees for fire departments were authorized last year by the state legislature in the wake of Prop. 13 and are intended to make up the deficit many of the special fire districts felt when their property taxes were cut, and state bailout money did not entirely cover the shortfall.

Aptos has been meeting with other mid-county fire departments in the last few months in an effort to arrive at a uniform fee schedule.

"No other district (in Santa Cruz County) has opted to go for an election," fire chief Nick Baumgartner told the board members.

"It looks like we will have enough money this year and if

necessary, we could go for a special election in June and get the people concerned out," he added.

Underlying Baumgartner's recommendations are two concerns: the district does not want to be the only department in Santa Cruz County to approach the voters, and officials feel it would have a better chance of passing a special election when they can urge supporters to vote.

Acting Board Chairman Walter Jordan said similar elections failed in all but two districts in Monterey County last month, including Aromas, Tri-County, Castroville, and Salinas Rural.

Jordan said one reason was that the boards there were not unanimous in their support of the idea. Aromas, he told the other directors, had one director opposed, and Salinas Rural and Castroville each had 3-2 boards going into the elections.

Further analyzing the Monterey County results, Baumgartner said "the majority of the districts that were suc-

cessful had paramedics, a good rescue service, were very affluent or had the backing of the firefighters associations who called the voters up."

Aptos, like other Santa Cruz County fire districts, had been worrying that it would not have enough money to continue operations as usual this year.

"This year, it appears that things are better," Baumgartner said. "Art Merrill (the county Auditor-Controller)

believes the growth will be good and Prop. 4 (the governmental spending limitation) will not affect us. We can continue operations, put \$40,000 into an equipment fund (partial payment on a new fire engine) and still have money left for next year."

Merrill is confident that county supervisors will go along with recommendations from the County Administrative Officer and himself on how to split the state bailout money this year.

"If we don't get enough, it is up to us to cut the budget," Jordan said, saying he wants the board to go ahead and adopt a full budget on July 29. "We can cut it if we have to," Jordan told the other directors, adding that the board can't legally increase the budget later in the year.

Cuts will be up to the fire board, not the county supervisors, Jordan stressed, responding to a suggestion by a county budget analyst that supervisors might tell the district what services or personnel to cut.

"If there is any cutting of the Aptos fire budget," Jordan said, "it will be the Aptos board that will do it."

Some supervisors have been critical of the highly popular paramedic program, suggesting that it was inequitable for it to be operated in Aptos with state bailout money, and not be available anywhere else in the county.

Negotiations for a new paramedic service contract between the county, Aptos fire and Dominican Hospital will get under way during the week of Aug. 4.