

Felton residents bridle at merging fire districts

By MARIA GAURA
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FELTON — A suggestion that Felton's volunteer fire department discuss merging with the Scotts Valley Fire District was dropped like a hot potato Tuesday after heated debate before the Felton Fire District's Board of Directors.

The merger idea was initially raised by John "Mac" McDonnell, Felton's just-retired fire chief. Volunteer firefighters who hold jobs in Felton are becoming increasingly scarce as Felton becomes more of a bedroom community, McDonnell said in an interview last week. As a result, the fire district is thinly protected on weekdays, he said.

Merging with the Scotts Valley Fire District would provide full-time paid firefighters to man the station round-the-clock, McDonnell said.

No discussions between the districts' boards have taken place. But Scotts Valley Fire Chief Bruce Scott spoke informally about the idea to Felton volunteers, at McDonnell's invitation, at a November gathering. News of Scott's appearance leaked out to the community, sparking myriad rumors.

The Felton board's regular meeting drew an unusually large crowd of about 20 Tuesday morning. Most of the audience was there to protest the rumored merger plans.

"This is just a step in the door for Scotts Valley," said Kris Crow, a Zayante resident and former Felton volunteer. "They need our water ... and this is a foot in the door for annexation (of Felton). They won't stop until they annex Ben

'This is just a step in the door for Scotts Valley. They won't stop until they annex Ben Lomond and the rest of the San Lorenzo Valley.'

— Kris Crowe, former Felton fire volunteer

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Crow and several others said Felton would lose control of its fire station if the merger took place. They urged the board to kick off a drive for new volunteers coordinated with local employers.

Michael Burns, president of the Felton Business Association, urged board members to hold a referendum on any proposed merger before a plan is approved.

"We'd be outnumbered three to one after a merger," said Burns.

The two districts theoretically could merge without a public vote if the boards of both districts agreed unanimously to adopt the plan, according to Steve Richmond, a Felton board member.

But the Felton board would never do such a thing without public comment, Richmond said. The district sent out a press release alerting local newspapers to the issue before any merger discussions were actually scheduled, he said.

"As upfront as we've been, it's tough to be accused of trying to railroad some-

thing through," Richmond said. "I think what happened is the result of rumors and poor communication."

Felton board members discounted rumors of a planned Scotts Valley takeover. "We called them, they didn't call us," said board President Wayne Dennis.

Scotts Valley's Chief Scott expressed wonder at the charges leveled Scotts Valley. He pointed out that the Scotts Valley Fire District has no connection to the city of Scotts Valley, and neither does the Scotts Valley Water District.

"Mac and I thought it was a good idea," he said. "But I guess it's not going to happen now."

But Richmond said Tuesday's meeting was "positive," and served to clear the air.

"We came away with good ideas," he said.

The board will concentrate on finding a new fire chief, he said, as well as kicking off a drive for new volunteers. The board has received 14 applications for the position, Richmond said. The chief's job is now the district's only paying position.