

Watsonville poised for fire merger talks

WATSONVILLE — The Watsonville City Council is poised to OK negotiations with Freedom Fire District for joint firefighting protection, but will wait to hear whether Freedom wants to pursue the issue.

In a two-hour joint study session Tuesday night before more than two dozen people, City Council and Freedom Fire Board members heard challenges and praises for the proposed agreement to consolidate the fire agencies by contract.

In the end, Councilman Vido Deretich motioned that the council enter into negotiations with Freedom. But Mayor Ann Soldo suggested, "Freedom should make the first move," so the council's decision was deferred.

The Freedom Fire Board will hold a special meeting at 7 p.m. Dec. 17 to take public comment. Not much was heard from the fire board members during Tuesday's meeting, but in the past, two of the three have indicated their reluctance to pursue the proposal.

At the end of Tuesday's meeting, some of the ice between the city and fire board appeared to be melting as members informally exchanged

ideas.

For more than 10 years, discussions have been held on merging fire protection for some, if not all, of the South County fire agencies.

This latest proposal would maintain Freedom as a separate entity, but consolidate firefighting personnel and equipment with Watsonville Station 2, which is less than a half mile from the Freedom station on Airport Boulevard. —

"We're not re-inventing the wheel. It's been done before," said Pat McCormack, executive director of the Local Agency Formation Commission, which oversees fire service areas. —

Watsonville had a similar contract with Pajaro for more than 50 years, said City Manager John Radin. From 1929 until 1980, Watsonville and Pajaro (in Monterey County) shared firemen and equipment. In 1980, Radin said, Pajaro broke the contract and joined Castroville's fire agency.

In Santa Cruz County, Live Oak and Soquel Fire District merged in 1982 to become Central County Fire, said Central Assistant Fire Chief Steve Negro. "The bottom line is we

are able to provide better fire protection for the people we serve and for our employees. When one guy arrives on the scene of a fire, he's putting his life on the line. ... And he hopes to God someone shows up to back him up."

Watsonville Fire Chief Gary Smith and Freedom Fire Chief Ben Evans have done a feasibility study that indicates the number of on-duty firefighters will rise substantially at little extra cost. Currently, Freedom operates with one firefighter much of the time and Watsonville Station 2 has two. The proposal would place four firemen on duty two-thirds of the time, and three for the remainder.

In a dramatic half-hour videotape, the fire chiefs showed the difference between a one-, two- and three-man

response to a fire.

"We jump considerably in our effectiveness from two to three men," said Smith, as evidenced in the video. "With four, we're really ahead of the flash-over period (the point at which a fire fully engulfs the structure)."

Smith, Evans and McCormack went over 14 key issues that have continually cropped up during the discussions. Among them is fire service to rural areas now covered by Freedom.

Smith said outlying areas more than pay for themselves, and that he has a personal commitment to seeing them included in the contract. He said it did not make sense fiscally to not include the tax base of rural areas.