

# Fire departments set to join forces

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CAPITOLA — A 15-year tug-of-war over the future of the Capitola Fire Department will end for good Saturday.

Consolidation of the Capitola and Central Fire districts will be official at 10 a.m. when a new board of directors is sworn in at the Jade Street Community Center.

The future of the department has been debated for 20 years or more. At first it was a political fight over whether the Fire Department should remain independent or become a city department.

Capitola Fire was established in 1939 as an independent taxing district, somewhat larger than the city limits and administered by an elected board of directors. The actual volunteer department began earlier, though nobody can remember exactly when.

Off and on, City Council members decided they wanted to have control of the Fire Department, but fire district directors resisted.

In 1972, informal consolidation talks began among chiefs of the Live Oak, Soquel and Capitola fire districts, also special taxing districts.

After Proposition 13 cut special-district finances, consolidation talks were revived. In 1982, Live Oak and Soquel consolidated to form the Central Fire District. Capitola Fire directors backed out at the last minute.

Going it alone quickly proved to be unwise because of shrinking finances. But it took the next five years before Capitola Fire District directors to decide on a partner.

The choices were familiar.

They took another look at Central. And they eyed becoming a department under the city of Capitola.

The Fire Board changed its mind back and forth. As late as this spring, the directors approached the Local Agency Formation Commission, seeking permission to reorganize under the city of Capitola.

LAFCO commissioned a study, which clearly showed that consolidation with Central Fire District would be the most efficient and cost-effective alternative.

Coming under the city, the study showed, could cost as much as \$600,000 a year.

LAFCO rejected the idea of a city-operated department.

Less than a week later, the Capitola Fire Board filed a new application, this time to consolidate with Central Fire District.

That application sailed through LAFCO and was approved by the county Board of Supervisors.

Capitola's 12 firefighters will join Central's 24 in the merged district. Capitola Fire Chief Jerry Bowles will become an assistant chief in charge of fire prevention.

The Capitola fire station will remain open, but with a new name on the door. Central Fire logos already have been affixed to the Capitola fire engines.

The district will operate three other stations: on 17th Avenue and Thurber Lane in Live Oak and in downtown Soquel, in addition to downtown Capitola. The district will serve 40,000 people in a 23.5-square mile area.

The biggest benefits to residents of Capitola will be an immediate response of two engine companies to any structure fire in the city. Capitola Fire had only one on-duty engine company.



Central Chief Harry Rowe, left,  
and Capitola Chief Jerry Bowles