

Fire-merger talks to be reopened

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An old discussion to consolidate South County fire districts will be reopened Wednesday when the Local Agency Formation Commission takes up the matter after a three-year hiatus.

Patrick McCormick, executive director of LAFCO, said he would recommend the consolidation, which he believes would result in more efficient service and greater safety for firefighters at no increased cost.

McCormick said great inefficiencies currently exist. For instance, the Freedom Fire Station is only three-quarters of a mile from Watsonville station No. 2 on Airport Boulevard.

The Freedom Fire Department, staffed 24 hours a day, never has more than two firefighters on duty, and sometimes only one, said McCormick.

Volunteers with pagers respond when there is a fire, but McCormick said there is the possibility of one firefighter on his own having to perform a rescue in a burning house with no backup outside to make sure he emerges safely, or to spray water to keep the fire from going in the same direction as the rescuer.

The Watsonville Fire Department has three men per shift, what McCormick called "the minimum urban staff." A consolidation with the Freedom and Salsipuedes districts would mean each Watsonville firehouse could be staffed with four men per shift, with no increase in overall staff costs, he said.

McCormick said he first recommended the consolidation in 1984, "but it was a little bit radical at the time." After some months of discussion, LAFCO took no action, and the matter has been in abeyance since 1985.

A consolidation still may be hard to swing, given the little political fiefdoms that constitute the various fire districts, most of which are ruled by

their own elected boards.

Fire officials in Watsonville and Salsipuedes responded positively but skeptically to the resurrected proposal.

"This has been talked about since 1973," said Salsipuedes Fire Chief Ron Hart. "It's never gone anywhere."

Hart said he thought the lack of action "has a lot to do with an identity type of deal."

"Some of the communities don't want to lose the identity of their areas — Freedom, Corralitos, Salsipuedes. But as a South County agency, we would be able to keep the identity with the individual stations. The district would probably be called Pajaro Valley," Hart said.

Hart agreed that a consolidation "could make a more efficient operation at no more cost to the public."

He also agreed that a consolidation might improve safety for firefighters by augmenting the number of men per shift.

However, Hart refused to say whether or not he would support the proposal.

"I'm going to stick with what my (fire district) board is going to do," said Hart. "I'm not going to give any opinions out right now, because my board might not like that."

Doug Williams, assistant fire chief in Watsonville, said his department had made a serious proposal to do contract work for the Freedom Fire District, while hiring the Freedom firefighters for the Watsonville staff.

"We could have combined (the two stations on Airport Boulevard)," Williams said. "But the Freedom board, it turned out, was not interested."

McCormick said further illogical duplication might occur in the future. Salsipuedes Fire District may build a new station on East Lake Avenue; if Watsonville expands in that direction, it also might build a fire station there, he said.