

FIVE AND THE
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Capitola wants control of own fire department

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The Capitola City Council took steps last night to bring the Capitola Fire Protection District under city control.

In an attempt to overturn the fire board of directors' recent 3-2 vote in favor of consolidation with the Central fire district, the council voted 3-1 to send a letter to Director John Oliveira, who they said cast the deciding vote. Councilman Jerry Clarke did not attend last night's meeting.

The letter would ask Oliveira to defer a final vote on the issue until it can be put to the people of Capitola in the form of an initiative on the ballot.

Mayor Bob Bucher and Councilmen Ron Graves and Michael Routh blasted as biased a consultant's study in favor of consolidation with the Central fire district, which encompasses Live Oak and Soquel. The county's Local Agency Formation Commission

commissioned the study after Capitola applied to make the fire district a subsidiary of the city.

A subsidiary district would have the advantage over a municipal district in that it could serve areas outside the city limits, as the Capitola fire district does now, while retaining Capitola's share of special-district funding from the county.

The study consultant, Hughes, Heiss & Associates of San Mateo, found that Capitola residents would get the most fire protection for their money through consolidation.

However, Councilmen Ron Graves said, "I really believe the citizens of Capitola have the most to lose out of a merger with Central."

Consolidation would lead to deterioration of fire protection services in Capitola, he said.

"This is almost a step back into the past," he said, "because the proper function of

a city is to have a fire department. And this is a damn good one."

The notion already exists in Capitola that the fire district is controlled by the city, Councilman Routh said.

Councilwoman Stephanie Harlan disagreed that the LAFCO study is biased. She did not support sending the letter to Oliveira, but suggested that the council hold a public hearing on the issue.

A hearing was set for the Feb. 12 council meeting.

Fire board Directors Wayne Fontes and Gene Warren, who voted against consolidation, agreed with the council that local control of Capitola's fire district would provide better fire protection.

"I feel that from a public safety standpoint, that local control is needed," Fontes said.

Capitola is unique in that only a small portion of fire calls are for actual fires, he said, or even for the smell of

smoke. The majority of calls are related to public safety.

"Mrs. O'Bucher's cow is not going to kick over a lantern and burn Capitola down," he said.

A problem which would result from consolidation, Warren said, is that there would be no guarantee the Capitola fire station would be manned. Someone could conceivably drown off Capitola Beach because firefighters were all up in the hills fighting wildfires, he said.

The study was misleading in stating that Capitola relies heavily on mutual aid from the Central Fire District, he said. In truth, Capitola requires Central's help only once or twice a year.

Warren also favored city control because he said it would leave the fire district more options. Once the Capitola fire district merged with Central, it would be nearly impossible to withdraw.

REFERENCE