

Fire board approves lofts

By MIKE WALLACE

Aptos Fire District directors Tuesday decided to allow lofts in classrooms within the district.

After hearing an hour of testimony on the subject, directors voted unanimously to change an earlier resolution and allow lofts which meet guidelines set down by the state fire marshal's office.

The vote drew a hearty round of applause from about 50 parents and students who had come to the meeting in support of the classroom lofts.

The classroom loft issue first came up last January when Assistant Fire Chief Nick Baumgartner ordered a loft removed from the classroom of teacher Ron Dodd at Aptos Junior High.

The loft, used for a variety of purposes, was deemed in violation of the fire code by Baumgartner, who is the district's fire marshal. The school complied with his order to remove the structure.

At last night's meeting, a parent, T. R. Dickson, urged the directors to reconsider policy on allowing lofts in the classrooms. "It has a function, so we think it's part of the classroom environment," said Dickson.

He told directors that at the time the loft was ordered removed by Baumgartner, the state fire marshal's office was developing guidelines for lofts in classrooms. Dickson said the loft in Dodd's room would have met those guidelines with a few alterations.

But, he said, at the February meeting of fire directors, a resolution was passed forbidding lofts within the district, and when new plans were brought to Baumgartner, the assistant chief said they could not be

accepted, due to the provisions of the resolution.

Dickson presented the board with a set of state guidelines pertaining to the loft, and board chairman Richard Duchscher asked Baumgartner if he would allow the loft if it met those guidelines.

"No I wouldn't," said Baumgartner. "The law says a local authority may be more restrictive, and I don't believe a loft of that size should be allowed."

Fire Chief Richard Chinn told directors that when the illegality of the loft was first called to Dodd's attention, the teacher was given 10 days to bring in a new set of plans.

"Those 10 days he spent on the telephone, mainly, trying to circumvent local authority," said Chinn.

This was denied by both Dickson and Dodd. Dickson said Dodd was merely trying to obtain information from the authorities he had been referred to by the fire district, and Dodd said he was trying to track down information from the state as to where, specifically, the loft was in violation of fire codes.

Directors then pressed Baumgartner, the only fire official who had seen the lofts, as to whether or not the structures met the new state guidelines. Baumgartner said they did.

Pajaro Valley school superintendent Wallace Raynor also asked directors to keep the loft, which he called "a real viable learning opportunity."

Raynor said the loft could be used for "alternate learning activities" such as tutorial work, isolating accelerated students and recreational reading. "It's only limited

by the imagination of the teacher," he said.

Raynor said the district was willing to meet with directors and work out whatever guidelines were necessary to allow the lofts (several exist in classrooms other than Dodd's) to continue in use. Dickson, too, had earlier stressed that parents and students who wanted the lofts would support reasonable regulations governing them.

Duchscher asked Chinn if he could support the state guidelines for the lofts, and Chinn replied that his major concern was that changes not be made in the lofts each time a new teacher takes over a room. He proposed that whenever a new teacher takes over a room with a loft in it, the loft should be re-inspected to insure no untoward changes have been made.

Director Walt Jordan, noting that Chinn had criticized Dodd for trying to go around local officials, said, "It should be noted that our department didn't go through channels either. We dealt directly with the teacher, rather than with the district."

As it appeared that directors were ready to allow the lofts, Baumgartner asked them to take into account the fact that the county fire marshal's association had adopted a more restrictive ruling on lofts.

"All you have to abide by is what we set up, Nick," said Jordan.

Directors changed the resolution forbidding lofts to read that lofts were forbidden, except when they met the guidelines set forth by the state.

After the vote, directors Jordan and Stewart Davis apologized to the parents on hand for not having resolved the matter more satisfactorily beforehand.