

Fire districts consider fees

Two Midcounty fire departments may be going to the voters for extra money later this year.

In the wake of state funding cutbacks, both Aptos Fire Chief Nick Baumgartner and Central County (Live Oak and Soquel) Fire Chief Harry Rowe said they are actively looking at the idea of asking district residents to approve "benefit fees" for their departments.

No firm decisions have been made by directors of either department, the fire chiefs stressed last week, but both chief officers are now gathering the paperwork that would be necessary for an election.

"County Auditor-Controller Art Merrill is recommending we gear up for a benefit assessment fee election if it is necessary," Baumgartner said last week. "Right now, we are looking at a November election if, indeed, it becomes necessary."

Baumgartner said the district board has until July 13 to decide if it wants to submit the benefit fee issue to the voters in November.

Aptos is now considering a \$1.4 million operating budget for the 1982-83 fiscal year — a budget that includes \$609,000 in state bailout funds and a general reserve of \$100,000.

Substantial cuts in the state aid, Baumgartner said, would quickly exhaust the district's reserve fund.

That leaves the district with two choices — cut from the 85 percent portion of the budget that is employee salaries and benefits, or cut service.

"If the money doesn't come through and the people don't want to maintain the level of service (which includes the county's only paramedic-level emergency medical service) then we will have to cut from the 85 percent that is salaries and benefits," Baumgartner said.

"It is very difficult in my opinion to go to the people," he added.

"Freedom (fire district) said they might not have to use the benefit fee and they didn't win. But if someone lets blood, then you will win."

Baumgartner declined to discuss the size of the

benefit fee, but there are 8,300 parcels in the district and if an average fee were charged to cover the complete loss of state funds (\$609,000) the average fee would be \$73.37 a year.

Fees are normally weighted, with residential, vacant and commercial land being charged different rates.

Rowe said the Central County fire agency (which is an amalgamation of the Live Oak and Soquel Fire Protection Districts) is also worried about the impact of state bailout cuts.

"If augmentation is eliminated or cut, then we will have to look at ways to get revenue into the agency."

He's several weeks or months behind Baumgartner in planning for an election and concedes that he could not have the paperwork ready for the November election.

"We are looking at the possibility of a mail election," he added. The agency receives \$661,505 in state bailout, with the remainder of its projected \$1,245,000 budget coming from local property taxes and interest.

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