

Aromas voters reject fire consolidation plan

By STEVE SHENDER

Voters in the Aromas Tri-County Fire District put the kibosh on fire district consolidation Tuesday, sending a controversial merger measure down to defeat on a two-to-one vote.

The consolidation measure, which would have merged the Aromas district with the much larger North Monterey County Fire District, needed a majority vote in both districts to pass.

Voters in the North County Fire District voted overwhelmingly in favor of consolidation, passing the measure on a three-to-one vote, 2,779 to 912. But Aromas voters rejected the merger 503-270, according to an unofficial final vote tally, and the 503 opposition votes in Aromas were more than enough to torpedo a consolidation favored by more than 3,000 voters in both districts.

Defeat of the consolidation measure spelled the end, for the time being, of a move begun several years ago, when, in the wake of the passage of Prop. 13, Monterey County supervisors began pressuring the county's numerous fire districts to combine and streamline their separate operations.

Most of the consolidation pressure was aimed at North County where fire protection chores were at the time split between three districts: Aromas, Castroville and Salinas Rural. Castroville subsequently annexed the Prunedale portion of the Salinas Rural district, creating the North County Fire District.

Consolidation proponents contended that the merger was needed to assure both districts a secure financial base in coming years. They noted that because the merged district would cross county lines, its tax revenues would be guaranteed under state law and the district would therefore not need to apply for county augmentation funds. They also argued that the merger would mean that the financially strapped Aromas district would share in the North County district's much larger tax base.

Opponents of the merger — principally, three of the five incumbents on the Aromas fire board — warned that passage of the consolidation measure would mean "loss of local control" for Aromas fire district residents. They said it was unlikely that Aromas residents would ever be able to muster enough votes to elect representatives to the board of a merged district dominated by voters residing in Castroville and Prunedale.

(Ironically, the leading vote-getter in a 10-way race for five seats on the board of the stillborn consolidated district was Bruce Shaw, an incumbent Aromas fire commissioner. Four incumbent North County commissioners also received enough votes to win seats on the new board, had there been a need for it.)

Michael Johnson, executive officer of Monterey County's Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), said this morning that defeat of consolidation spelled financial trouble for Aromas. "Our indication all along has been that they do not have the cash flow to sustain themselves (as an independent district)," Johnson said.

"By the end of this fiscal year, unless circumstances change significantly as a result of cuts in costs, reduced services or increased revenues, they're going to be in serious financial condition," he said.

The Aromas district finished the 1981-82 fiscal year in the red. This year, fire commissioners avoided a year-end deficit by deferring a payments on a new fire truck and an insurance premium until after July 1.

North Monterey County Supervisor Marc Del Piero, who argued forcefully for months in favor of consolidation, was philosophical about the merger's defeat. "The voters had an opportunity to vote on the issue and that's the thing I was most concerned about," he said.

"I have serious reservations about the fiscal stability of the Aromas Fire District, but since they decided they want their own district, I will be as supportive as possible."

Aromas Fire Commissioner Mary Jane Morton, who fought initially to prevent the consolidation matter from ever reaching the ballot and then campaigned vigorously against it, could not be reached for comment this morning.