

Fire districts weigh merger 'to stay afloat'

Salsipuedes, Freedom deal with state cutbacks

By LANE WALLACE
STAFF WRITER

Directors of the Freedom and Salsipuedes fire districts are talking about a merger that could take effect as early as July 3.

With the state cutting back on its allocation of money to fire districts, merging "is the only way to stay afloat," said Salsipuedes Fire Chief Ron Hart.

Directors of the two districts, which have held two joint meetings on the merger, will hold another May 26 at 7 p.m. at the Freedom fire station. That will be the first joint meeting since directors received a report from Hart and Freedom Fire Chief Ben Evans on the new district's budget and organizational chart.

A decision is not expected next week, Hart said. Further hearings will be needed next month before the merger could become official.

The merger would be called a joint powers agreement that would be in effect for at least two years. "It's like an engagement," Hart said.

If directors of the two boards are satisfied with the joint powers agreement, a formal consolidation could then be voted on. No vote of the electorate is required for ei-

ther arrangement.

The merged district would be known as the Pajaro Valley Fire Protection Agency, with the Freedom and Salsipuedes stations retaining their names. The headquarters would be at the Freedom station.

At the same time they're working on the joint powers agreement, the two districts are studying the possibility of another merger. That merger could include the Watsonville city Fire Department and state Division of Forestry's Corralitos station, Hart said.

The Salsipuedes-Freedom merger would not preclude the larger merger, Hart said.

Merging the districts would save on administrative and equipment costs, said Hart and Freedom fire chief Ben Evans.

There would be one fire chief and one assistant chief. "Sometimes I'm going down to the county building in Santa Cruz (for administrative business) and Ron is 30 seconds behind me," said Evans.

Evans and Hart have drawn a preliminary budget that combines Freedom's \$370,000 with Salsipuedes's \$491,000 for a \$861,000

See MERGER / back of section ▶

MERGER

▶ From Page 1 MAY 18 1993

total. That figure could change, depending on how much the state allocates to fire districts.

The \$861,000 calls for retaining the present staff of nine full-time firefighters: four from Freedom and five from Salsipuedes. The pay levels are similar: Hart makes \$48,646 a year, Evans makes \$45,604, and captains at both districts make about \$35,000.

If the joint powers agreement is approved, Evans said, the new district could sell a third of the equipment the two districts now have. He doesn't expect that would raise much money, because most of what would be sold doesn't have high resale value.

The financial advantages of a merger will be even greater in the future, Evans said, because the new district won't have to buy as much new equipment.

For many Salsipuedes residents, the merger would mean a quicker response time. Evans and Hart agreed that 80 percent of Salsipuedes district residents can be reached faster from the Freedom station than Salsipuedes.

There's now five firefighters on duty during the day at the two stations, and plans call to continue that number. At night, instead of one paid firefighter at each station, there would be two at Freedom, and two reserves would be paid to stay at the Salsipuedes station.

Hart said some Salsipuedes reserves have questions about the merger, but he hasn't run into any opposition to it.

The new district would be governed by a five-member board, made up of members of the three-member boards for the two present fire districts. The old boards would still have the power to cancel the joint powers agreement, but wouldn't oversee day-to-day operations.