

# County dumps sheriff's fees

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SANTA CRUZ — Bowing to intense public pressure, county supervisors voted Tuesday to drop a special tax levy aimed at raising nearly \$2.4 million for the sheriff's department budget in fiscal 1986-87.

The board's action means that owners of property in the county's unincorporated areas will not have to pay flat-rate "service fees," ranging from \$18 annually for residences in rural areas to \$2,547 a year for so-called "major" commercial properties in urban areas like Live Oak, Soquel and Aptos.

The action also means that Tax Collector-Treasurer Bill Murphy will have to send out new tax bills, and soon. The first installments on this year's taxes are due Dec. 10.

In addition, the board's vote means that the sheriff's department will have to drop plans to add two new year-round patrol beats and a summertime beach patrol this year. The axed service fee, which was approved in June by the board with ample public notice but little public attention, was intended to finance the added patrols.

The board's decision, which came in front of an unruly crowd of angry property owners after three hours of public testimony, will likely have an impact beyond sheriff's protection. Hopes for an expansion of library services in the county also may have died with the sheriff's protection fee Tuesday. (See story, Page A5.)

Aptos Supervisor Robley Levy said after the vote that she thought it unlikely that the board would now support a proposal to impose service fees on county property owners for the financially strapped city-county

library system. The board is to decide whether to form a county service area for the libraries — similar to the one formed to finance sheriff's services — Dec. 9.

The new sheriff's protection fees were approved by supervisors during last June's budget sessions, when the board agreed to increase the Sheriff's Department budget 17.8 percent in 1986-87.

Because the flat-rate service fees were tied to property categories instead of property values, supervisors were able to impose them without voter approval.

While the fees drew little public comment when the board approved them, they stirred a hornets' nest of protest when they turned up on tax bills in late October.

Under a fee schedule devised by the county administrator's office and approved by supervisors last summer, homeowners in the county's urbanized and rural areas were charged \$33.11 and \$18.10, respectively, for sheriff's services in 1986-87.

But much steeper fees were imposed on commercial properties, and virtually all of the complaints came from commercial property owners, who received tax increases ranging from \$348 to \$2,547 a year.

The fees imposed on those properties were based on assessor's land-use codes. County staffers said Tuesday that the codes turned out to be seriously flawed.

County Administrative Officer George Newell tried to dampen the tax revolt this week with a proposal to slash fees for minor commercial properties 65 percent. He also proposed that the county review the

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## Fees

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fees imposed on 212 major commercial parcels.

But tax protesters said Tuesday they wanted none of the CAO's half measures.

Carolyn Busenhart, a Soquel businesswoman who organized the opposition to the service fee, was the group's principal spokeswoman. She

said nothing short of outright elimination of the fees would satisfy opponents.

The 14,000 people who signed petitions opposing the sheriff's service fees, Busenhart said, had "not (asked) for, nor will they accept a compromise of any kind."

Busenhart said there were ample funds in the county's budget to

finance sheriff's services without special fees.

Fifth District Supervisor Joe Cucchiara, who moved to eliminate the fees Tuesday, said they had been based on an "inaccurate and inappropriate foundation."

He said it would be "impossible" for the board to "unravel" the fee schedule "in any fair way."