

Mid-county group pushes for fire tax

By MARK BERGSTROM

Sentinel Staff Writer

LIVE OAK — Mid-county residents will lead the drive to gain voter approval in June of a special tax to guarantee the future of the Central County Fire Agency.

A citizens' organization, announced Monday night as the Citizens for Guaranteed Fire Protection, met at the Live Oak fire station to map strategy for the June 7 election.

Dave Tunno, president of the Soquel Chamber of Commerce, is chairman of the new organization. He told some 40 persons at the meeting, "We must hit the streets and tell the people we're supportive (of the tax)."

The group plans to go door-to-door in Live Oak and Soquel neighborhoods, and to hand and mail out pamphlets explaining why they should tax themselves and what they might lose if they don't.

Directors of the fire agency have put the tax issue on the ballot as a means of guaranteeing future funding to maintain the current level of fire and rescue service in the two communities.

The agency, formed in January 1982 by the merger of the Soquel and Live Oak fire departments, currently is funded by property tax and a special "augmentation" fund, a fund intended to make up the difference between the property tax revenue and the agency's minimum budget needs.

The augmentation fund was set up by the state legislature as a means of making up lost revenue to special districts, such as fire districts, which lost revenue because of Proposition 13. Previously, fire districts were totally dependent on the property tax for their revenue.

Now, each special district contributes a portion of its property tax revenue into the augmentation fund. Contributions go to Sacramento and then are handed back to local county boards of supervisors for distribution.

Districts get back more or less than they contribute, depending on their budget needs.

This year, Central County Fire's portion was \$260,000, or 49 percent of its budget.

Directors of the Central County Fire Agency and of fire districts up and down the state fear that state and county governments might dip skim off the augmentation fund to meet their own needs.

"The (augmentation) money passes through state and then county government hands," Tunno told his group Monday night. "That should tell you something." He said the threat to dip into the fund "is not an idle threat."

The tax measure is seen as a hedge against that happening and would allow fire agency directors to impose a fee should the augmentation fund not meet minimum budget needs. According to the formula adopted by directors and proposed on the ballot, the maximum fee that could be assessed against a single family home in the district would be \$90 a year.

Both vacant land and improved property could be taxed if the measure, to be known as Measure B, is passed by a two-thirds majority.

Each type structure would be assessed a fee on a sliding scale which would include \$90 plus \$15 per space for mobile home parks, \$180 for medical, dental, bank or financial buildings, \$225 for poultry farming and \$360 for manufacturing.

It is unlikely that those maximum fees ever would be collected, says agency Chief Harry Rowe, since the maximum would be based on the loss of the entire augmentation fund.

Amounts of the proposed fees are based on the difficulty each type of occupancy would provide in case of fire and the number of firefighters and apparatus which would be needed to fight such a fire.

Central County Fire's 27 paid and 36 volunteer firefighters serve 35,000 households in a 21-square-mile area. Last year, the agency responded to 1,836 fire and medical emergency calls.

Like other fire departments, the bulk of Central's budget goes for salaries. Any sizeable reduction in the augmentation fund therefore would result in a reduction in the number of firefighters, if the tax measure should fail.

Agency directors decided to proceed with a special June election, Rowe says, because even if the tax measure passes, the agency, if it should need to levy fees, would not realize the money for at least a year.

"If we had waited (until the fund were cut) to hold an election, we would have to go a year to 18 months operating at a reduced level," Rowe explains.

"From the disasters we've been through the past two years and from reading the list of fire and rescue calls, the last thing we want to do is see our level of fire service deteriorate," Tunno told the citizens' group.

Tunno also explained that fire insurance premiums are tied to the level of fire protection in a community, and he gave examples of how different fire insurance ratings translate into policy cost.

The new Citizens for Guaranteed Fire Protection got some financial aid of its own Monday night, with a \$900 donation of the Soquel Lions Club from a recent pancake breakfast and a \$100 donation from a private citizen.

Contributions, Tunno said, can be taken to the Soquel branch of County Bank or mailed to the bank at P.O. Box 100, Soquel, 95023.