

Fire and Fire
Protection to 1988

Aptos Fire District has no interest in expanding

By BOB SMITH

The Aptos Fire District will not join with its neighboring fire districts in either joint powers or consolidation talks.

In a meeting Tuesday night with Pat McCormick, executive officer of the Santa Cruz County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), directors also said they do not now want to annex any additional territory to the fire district, especially not the Redwood Drive area north of Aptos Village, where a large fire last September burned two homes, a car and an acre of timber and brush before Aptos and Department of Forestry firemen were able to stop it.

Fire board members stopped short of asking LAFCO to reduce the district's "sphere of influence" to the present district boundaries after the board's attorney, Tom Wichelmann, assured them that no territory could be annexed to the fire district without the board's consent.

Board members are also studying the possibility of asking voters next June to approve a "benefit tax" that would fund the fire district for the next three years. But the question will go to an election, board president Richard Duchscher said, only if one of two things occur: if the state completely cuts off the augmentation funds that presently supplement the fire districts' property-tax revenues; or if the county Board of Supervisors assures the Aptos district that it will not lose its share of the augmentation funds if a benefit tax is approved.

The fire directors met with McCormick after receiving a form letter from LAFCO chairman Joe Ghio, suggesting that the fire districts "study changes in organization (consolidations, mergers, joint powers agreements and contracts for services)."

The fire board members, led by Duchscher, don't believe it is in Aptos's best interest now to merge with the largely volunteer departments on either side — Soquel and

La Selva Beach.

A decade ago, however, Duchscher and other Aptos board members were actively promoting fire department consolidation in Santa Cruz County, but with the passage of Prop. 13, the Aptos board no longer believes it's financially practical.

"My main concern is that we are bounded by two eight-hour districts, and we are a 24-hour district," said Duchscher, referring to the differences in departmental manning. Aptos has paid fire fighters and paramedics on duty in two fire stations 24 hours a day. La Selva has paid personnel on duty only eight hours a day and utilizes volunteers at night and on weekends to answer emergency calls.

Soquel, up to now, has had the same manning procedures as La Selva Beach. But beginning the first of the year, under a joint powers agreement with the Live Oak fire department, it will station two paid firemen on duty 24 hours a day at the Soquel fire station. They will be augmented by volunteers and crews from the Live Oak department.

"It is pretty tough for us to look at a joint powers agreement," Duchscher added, "and not look at a reduction of service (in the Aptos area.)"

"It doesn't make sense to me to supplement these people (La Selva or Soquel). Ten years ago," Duchscher added, "I got up at a board meeting and suggested consolidation because we then had a report — the Sierra report — that recommended that we consolidate in all sorts of different ways because we were all starting to build fire stations.

"They (directors of other districts) damn near tarred and feathered me and wanted to run me out of the county.

"We also looked at it from the standpoint of getting together in the Midcounty and having some semblance of order — if we were going to go for benefit taxes, of

having the same type. This was also denied us (by the other districts)," Duchscher said.

"My real problem right now," Duchscher told McCormick, "is that we have a viable district that is functioning quite well financially.

"What do we do? Join a joint powers agreement with La Selva Beach when they are out collecting money door to door?" Duchscher asked McCormick. "All we would do is take our people and give them more area to cover."

The board president, apparently speaking for the other four board members, said he doesn't think there is the money now to run a "super-fire district" if one were to be formed in Santa Cruz County, nor is there administrative personnel within the present county fire departments capable of running such a district. "We'd have to go out and hire someone to run the super-district."

"I really don't know what to do," Duchscher added, referring again to the suggestion that Aptos, in effect, bail out the smaller "volunteer" Soquel and La Selva Beach departments. "I really think that Soquel needed help and they got it (from Live Oak).

"I hope this doesn't get put in the paper, but La Selva Beach needs the help, too. I don't know if I can look at the taxpayers in Aptos and say 'I'm going to divide up my 21 people, cover a greater area and give you the same sort of service.'

"I have sympathy for La Selva Beach, but I can't justify dividing up our troops," the director added.

"Would I be in contempt of court," he asked McCormick with a grin, "if I tell you to stick this plan in your ear?"

McCormick assured the board members that LAFCO has no plans to force fire district consolidations, but also warned them that no one knows how much longer the state legislature will continue to allocate the augmentation funds to the local districts.

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