

COVER STORY

Fires + Fire Protection

The District
With Choices:

Fire chiefs prepare for the construction of an Administration Building Which Some Say is Too Elaborate

by Mark Adams

The Central Fire Protection District (CFPD) is the largest of its kind in the county. It's a consolidation of three fire districts and protects residents in a 29 square mile area including Capitola, Soquel and Live Oak. Last year, the district answered some 3,139 emergency calls.

When CFPD consolidated in the 1980s, there arose a need to build an administrative center to coordinate activities at its four fire stations, administrators explained.

Today, they are planning to construct a 6,600 square foot administration building. The district hopes to begin construction sometime during the next several months.

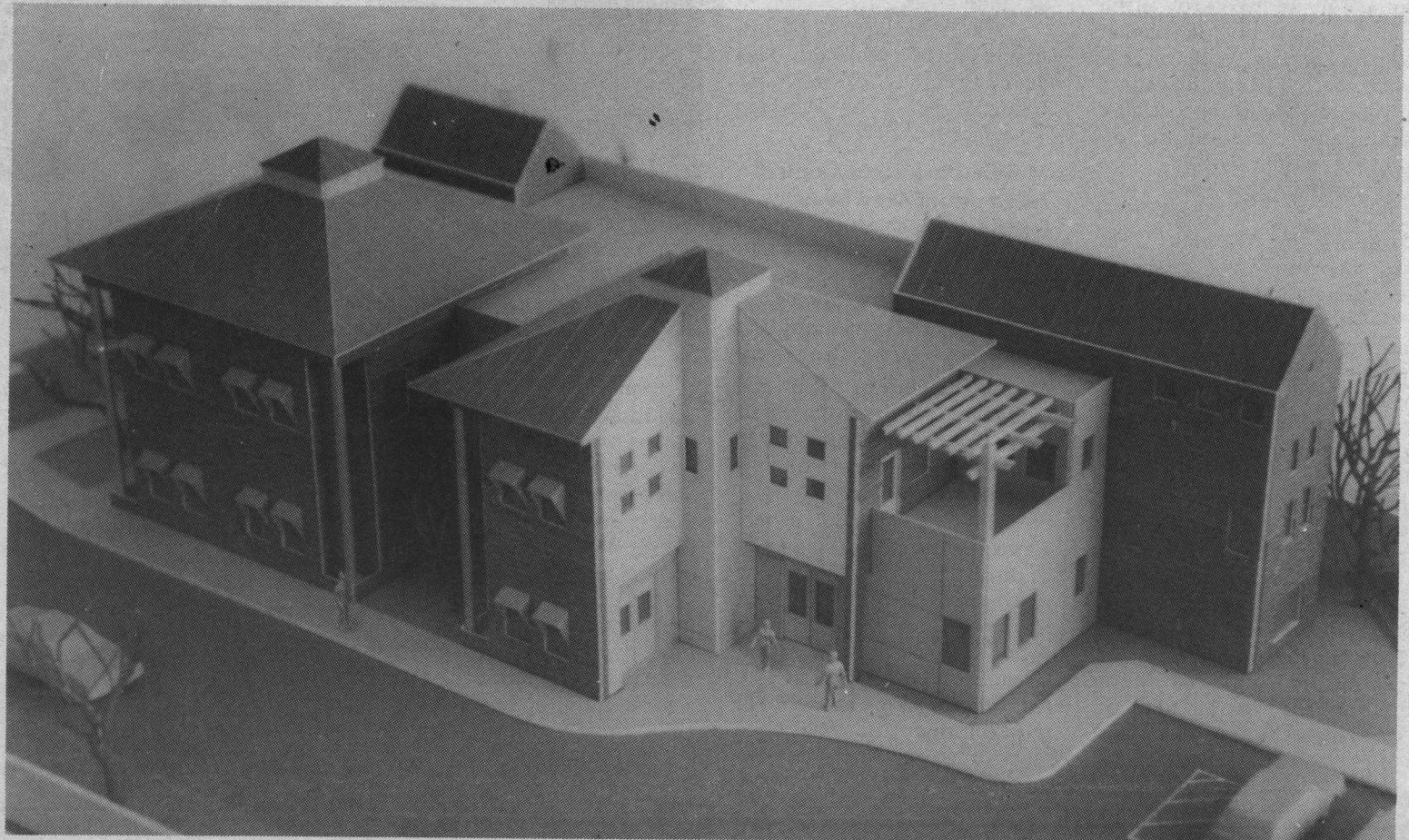
And while many county agencies are struggling to make ends meet, CFPD remains relatively unscathed by the financial woes of this decade. District expenditures—including money placed in reserves—total more than five million dollars this year, and with its reserves, CFPD has the financial capacity to make many improvements.

However, some in the community are concerned that the district is being perhaps too liberal with funds for the construction of a new administrative center. They question the district's priorities and wonder how this proposed center can improve services offered to residents.

But it is a decision the district is willing and preparing to make.

Consolidation of the Districts

During the 1984/85 fiscal year, the Live Oak and Soquel Fire Protection Districts consolidated into a single entity which became known as the Central Fire Protection District. Those districts were later



A model of the proposed 6,600 square foot administrative center, to be located on Jade Street in Capitola.

joined by the Capitola Fire Protection District in 1987.

A seven member elected board of directors governs the district. This board was assembled from the three independent district's five member boards.

The benefits of consolidation were many; no longer would each district have to purchase its own set of fire equipment. The newer, larger district could share resources.

But none of the fire stations in these once independent districts provided enough office space to house its administrators.

"You need a nucleus or core center to operate from," board chairman, Max Kludt explained.

In 1987, Kludt said the board felt the best solution was to lease office space until CFPD could save enough funds to build an administrative center.

It was also decided, and later finalized, that the district's administrative staff consist of one fire chief, two assistant chiefs (though one position is currently vacant), three battalion chiefs, three fire investigators and a few clerical workers.

This staff coordinates four fire stations, each with a

24-hour, three-man engine company.

Up Against the Lease

The district is presently leasing office space in a business complex off Porter Drive in Capitola. In 1987, the lease was \$25,000 a year, but today that amount has increased to \$45,000 a year.

"We [the board] consider that a waste of taxpayers money," Kludt said.

"That's \$45,000 a year that's going down the tubes... and an investment in our own building will be much more beneficial," Fire Chief Mark Tranchina further explained.

But not just any building will do: "Being that we are an essential service provider, the building has to be built 150 percent stronger seismically than the average office building... because we need to be open for business during an earthquake," Tranchina said.

The administrative offices are designated to serve as a command center in the event of a major earthquake or some other natural disaster. Under the Essential Services Act (made into law in 1986), any building providing an emergency service must be able to reasonably withstand the

effects of a natural disaster.

But during the Loma Prieta quake of 1989, the command staff was forced to vacate the building and operations were conducted from a tailgate in the parking lot for nearly three hours.

The search for another building, to lease or purchase, produced no viable economical options, Tranchina explained. Either the cost was too high, or the building did not meet essential service standards.

District Priorities

Those opposed to the district's plans point out that the administration building is not the only structure falling short of essential service standards.

The district's master plan acknowledges this.

Two stations, the Capitola Fire Station and the Soquel Fire Station, are located in areas designated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as being at risk of flooding. Both are located near the Soquel Creek which has flooded twice, once in 1955 and again in 1982.

"It (the Capitola station) is in a floodplain... We've given some consideration to relocating that station,"

Tranchina said. "But we are also aware of the need to keep that station close to the Village, to keep that area protected."

He added that during the floods the Capitola fire station was not damaged. However, this station is being retrofitted to repair damage it sustained during the 1989 quake. The cost of this project, currently underway, is estimated at about \$140,000. Repairing the Capitola station is the district's top priority.

Tranchina did note that if a suitable site is found the district would consider relocating the Capitola station.

The Soquel Fire Station, on Soquel Drive, poses a greater dilemma for the district.

"It's in a floodway and has flooded in '55 and '82," Tranchina said. "We have contingency plans for the next flood. We know what we're going to do and where we're going to go."

According to the district's master plan, the Soquel station is slated for relocation after work on the administration building is completed. The district is also waiting the outcome of the O'Neill Ranch/Extension project before committing itself

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to a relocation project, Tranchina explained.

Opposition District Faces

There are those in the community who are opposed to the district's proposed administrative center. And while they are few, it should also be noted that very few residents actually attend district meetings.

"In five months we have held eight public hearings," Tranchina said.

Attendance was generally limited to ten individuals.

Actively pursuing the district's moves is Glen Hanna, a resident of Capitola and also the city's newly elected treasurer.

"One of the problems is, of the four fire houses in the district, two of them are in the hundred year floodplain," Hanna said.

"What we got here is an administrative boon-doggle of the first magnitude," Hanna criticized. "The fire department is awash with money. They got all the money to pay for this, that is not an issue, it's a question of priorities."

Former fire district board member and resident of Capitola, Bill Sintkins shares a similar sentiment.

"As a person who pays taxes, are [the district's priorities] in the best interest of the community?" Sintkins queried.

The problem, Sintkins suggests, lies with management.

"I think they are way top-heavy in administration," Sintkins said.

He also questions whether the proposed administrative building is too big—even for the "top-heavy" staff—and he wonders if it is properly located.

"The administrative staff should be on site with a fire station," Sintkins said. "I think [otherwise] it's a bad management style."

The district had considered placing administrative offices with a fire station in an earlier "super station" plan. Under this plan, the Soquel fire station and another station located on Thurber Lane would shut down to combine with administrative offices to make up the "super station." This station would have been situated somewhere between the two fire houses.

But the board and fire chiefs balked at the five to seven million dollar price tag estimated for the project and those plans were discarded.

Still Sintkins feels the district is compromising itself by separating the administrators from the firefighters.

Plans for the New Center

District officials are confident though that the current

plan is in the best interest of the community.

The proposed administrative building will be located on Jade Street in Capitola. The district purchased the property on two separate occasions back in the 60s and 70s for a total of \$20,000. Today, the property is worth \$350,000, administrators estimated.

Plans call for the construction of a 6,600 square foot, two-story building which will include 12 offices, one conference room, one break room, one lunch room and four bathrooms.

Critics of the proposal, namely Hanna and Sintkins, said the plan is a bit elaborate.

Incidentally, in March, the Capitola City Council denied the district's application to begin construction. City planners were concerned with certain elements of the proposal. One point of concern was parking spaces for fire trucks. No spaces were allotted for trucks to park in during training sessions.

The district then re-worked the plan. This new application, on April 23, was appealed by the council for further review, an action city planners said was not unusual.

"Our office is more than an office," Tranchina said. "It's going to be our emergency operations center during disasters, a training classroom [for fire fighters] and a meeting room [for district board meetings]."

Tranchina, through his own estimates, believes the district could save approximately \$1.7 million over the course of 35 years through this proposal.

"The basic idea [was] that if we are spending \$45,000 a year today, and we are projecting a building that is going to last us 35 years, that the cost of the building is only going to be about half of what it would cost us leasing," Tranchina said.

The administrative center will cost around \$700,000 to \$800,000, he estimated. Working from the higher figure, that comes to \$121 a square foot.

"And that includes all the improvements the city is requiring us to do," Tranchina said. "That's not just the building, that's everything."

This figure is similar to one reported by the Santa Cruz County Office of Administration. The county estimates that the cost of an essential services structure is around \$120 to \$130 a square foot. But this figure does not include landscaping, pavement for parking or architecture fees, whereas CFPD's does.

By this standard, Tranchina's figures could be

off by as much as \$200,000.

Tranchina acknowledged that the district has not conducted a "real cost analysis."

"But I feel pretty comfortable that it's going to be about \$700,000," he asserted.

Funding for the project will come from the districts reserves which presently total \$750,000. And, courtesy of the state, a one-time rebate from the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS)—a system the district pays monthly—is expected to add an additional \$1.4 million to reserves.

"We feel confident pursuing this project because we know we have [the funds]. We are not dependent on [future] tax revenues for this project," Tranchina said.

Comparison of Costs

Saving money over the next 35 years, based on a calculation of construction costs versus rental expenses is one way to look at the equation.

Hypothetically, if the district sold the Jade Street property, at present value, and then banked those dollars, along with estimated construction and development costs of \$900,000 (costs based on county square foot figures), the interest the district could collect yearly would be more than \$81,000. This assumes a simple interest rate (not compounded) of 6.5 percent. The savings, not including the principle left in the bank, after 35 years is \$1.27 million.

A District With Choices

The story of the Central Fire Protection District is one of choices. There are many demands. One demand concerns the administrative center, the other concerns fire stations.

During the next 10 to 15 years, the district anticipates a growth rate of about 47 percent in the Live Oak and Soquel areas. This growth will most likely preserve CFPD's base of revenue—though revenues wouldn't increase much due to revenue caps imposed by the state. And, this gives at least one government agency an opportunity to make some important changes.

The district may acquire another fire station (on the summit, near San Jose Road), the number of employed firefighters will probably increase and consolidation with other districts is a possibility.

Those factors, plus the need to relocate one, maybe two, fire stations are essential elements of future planning—issues that are only partially identified in the district's master plan. For today, administrators are content with these projections. □