



Strapped fire districts may have to cut services

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SALINAS — Rather than looking for more money, fire districts may have to look at eliminating their response to non-fire-related calls.

Fire chiefs from throughout the state told members of the state Senate Committee on Local Government here Wednesday that fire districts need a permanent form of financing to insure full emergency services to their residents in the future.

State Sens. Henry Mello, D-Watsonville, and Rose Ann Vuich, D-Dinuba, sympathized with the fire chiefs, but repeatedly reminded them that with a projected state budget deficit of \$1 billion, legislators probably can't help.

As the day-long hearing progressed and several chiefs explained how their firefighters are called to render a variety of free emergency and public service.

Salinas Fire Chief Tom Campbell, for example, said only about 15 percent of his department's calls are for structure fires.

More than 70 percent of his department's calls relate to medical emergencies, vehicle accidents, chemical spills and a variety of public service.

Those statistics generally hold true for fire districts in Santa Cruz County.

Vuich suggested that rather than seeking ways to

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raise revenue, districts might have to look at cutting out some of the kinds of calls they respond to.

"That's the first time in five years (since Proposition 13) I've heard anybody say we ought to return to firefighting and cut out other services," Scotts Valley Fire Chief Bruce Scott told The Sentinel after the hearing.

Unless fire districts can come up with a permanent form of financing, providing more money than they are receiving now, Scott said he believes "it will come to that (eliminating services.)"

The fire districts' financial plight dates back to passage of Proposition 13 in 1978. Prior to then, fire districts received more than 90 percent of their funding from the property tax.

Three years after passage of Proposition 13, direct property taxes accounted for only 36 percent of the fire districts' revenue.

The first year following Proposition 13, the state made up the difference from its budget surplus. Then, the Legislature set up a special district augmentation fund, which comes indirectly from local property taxes, but with school financing removed from the tax divvy.

That pool of money then is distributed by the counties to all special districts, including fire districts, library districts and mosquito abatement districts. According to state statistics, in 1980-81, fire districts generally received about 48 percent of their total revenues from the augmentation fund.

The property tax money plus augmentation funds generally has not proved sufficient to meet the needs of fire districts.

In an attempt to create an avenue of additional financing, the legislature in 1979 passed a bill allowing fire districts to impose special fire protection taxes with a two-thirds' majority vote of district voters.

Passing such tax elections by two-thirds' majorities has proven difficult.

Mello reported that in 1980 only nine of 37 such elections passed statewide. In 1981, only one of six passed.

Monterey County Supervisor Barbara Shipnuck suggested that the Legislature amend the bill to provide for passage by a simple majority.

But, Mello and Vuich said that would present both philosophical questions for legislators and a legal question since Proposition 13 dictates that taxes can only be increased by a two-thirds' majority vote.

Dan Allen, legislative advocate, and Bill Ross, legal counsel, to the California Fire Districts Association both called for "certainty to the funding process."

If the permanent solution is to be an augmentation fund, the fire districts, he said, need to know what their percentage of the pot is going to be. If that is to be the funding mechanism, it should be placed in the hands of the special districts without control by either the state or county governments, through whose hands the money now passes.

Each county now determines how much of the fund is to go to the fire districts and that percentage has been fluctuating. Two years ago, for example, Monterey County fire districts received only 86 percent of their contributions to the fund while L.A. County Fire got 108 percent of what it put into its county fund this year.

Without knowing what to expect year to year, fire districts cannot plan for the future, Central County (Live Oak-Soquel) Chief Harry Rowe wrote the committee prior to the meeting.

If the fire districts cannot count on the augmentation fund for permanent financing, Rowe said, the districts should be told.

That way, he said, they can go to the voters and ask them to determine what level of service they want to fund through a special tax.