

# New fire district formed with merger in Midcounty

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Fire protection in Midcounty will take a new shape Saturday when the Central Fire Protection District of Santa Cruz County and the Capitola Fire Protection District formally merge.

The merger will close a long debate on the pros and cons of regional fire districts. The debate drew considerable attention in 1982 when Capitola decided not to join the Live Oak and Soquel fire districts when the two formed the present Central District.

The move left the Capitola Fire District an isolated island, completely surrounded by the larger Central District.

Fire officials from both districts say that the new district — to be known as the Fire Protection District of Santa Cruz County — will provide more comprehensive and more efficient service to its 40,000 residents.

Saturday's merger will put four on-duty fire engine companies within the new district's 25-square-mile boundary. The boundary begins at the Santa Cruz City limits, includes the city of Capitola and extends

through the Cabrillo College area.

"Saturday for me is the light at the end of the tunnel," said Central District Fire Chief Harry Rowe. Rowe will be the fire chief of the new district.

Rowe described the merger as "perfect logistics," putting two stations on the south side of Highway 1, and two on the north side. The arrangement, he said, will allow the new district to respond more quickly to fire and medical-aid calls.

Capitola Fire Chief Jerry Bowles said the merger is definitely not a "hostile takeover." Bowles, who will be the second-assistant fire chief in charge of fire prevention in the new district, said Capitola city residents in particular will be better protected.

Currently, Bowles said, Capitola has only one manned fire engine to dispatch when a call first comes in. Before sending a backup unit, the district had to wait for volunteer firefighters to report to the station. After Saturday, the Capitola engine will be one of four companies able to respond to a call.

When talks of a merger were renewed between the Central and Capitola districts, Capitola officials made a bid to have the city district become a city

department. City Manager Steve Burrell said the city initially had some concerns that Capitola's needs might not be fully addressed.

But the new fire district promised to keep the present Capitola station, and to enlarge its board of directors to include two members from Capitola. The board for the new district will have seven members, with three from Live Oak, two from Soquel and the additional two from Capitola.

Chief Rowe said the city's requests suited the plans for the new district. He said the Capitola station currently handles 35 percent of all calls answered in the new district's territory.

Now, Burrell says, "things seem to be going smoothly — the (new district) looks real good."

The merger will leave the Midcounty area with two consolidated districts (the other is the Aptos/La Selva Fire Protection District), and a county-wide total of 11 fire-protection districts and two city fire departments.

The new board of directors of the Central District will be sworn in Saturday at 10 a.m. at the Jade Street Community Center in Capitola.