

Fire merger talks OK'd

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FREEDOM — It's taken more than 10 years of discussion and four different proposals, but Freedom Fire commissioners voted unanimously Wednesday night to open talks with the city of Watsonville for combined fire protection.

The three-member Freedom fire board will draw up a contract to be presented to the City Council for negotiation. Because of the amount of work that needs to be done, the contract probably won't begin until July 1988.

"We've looked at this three to four months, and to me, it looks like a good chance we could put together a contract that meets the concerns of the district," said Commissioner Chuck Barr. Any day there are three firefighters going out on a call instead of one, it's better fire protection, he added.

Saying he saw "a lot of things in this thing that are hazy," Commissioner Bob Lee insisted on the proviso that negotiations be dropped if Freedom "sees something that's not going to work out."

Many of the two dozen Freedom residents who turned out for the meeting supported the idea of a contract for fire protection. But they raised a number of issues for the commissioners to consider as they hammer out an agreement.

A key issue is cost control. As Watsonville develops industrially, Freedom doesn't want to see its share of the budget going to pay for a higher level of fire protection. Watsonville Fire Chief Gary Smith pointed out that new industry would likely be required to finance any special equipment the fire department would need.

Another issue is annexation. Several Freedom residents who fought annexation in the late 1970s worried that this was just another move by Watsonville to take over Freedom.

"Watsonville is not going to go out like a lion and grab parts of Freedom," promised Mayor Ann Soldo. "I want to dispel the idea that Watsonville wants to take Freedom." She pointed to the poor condition of streets and sidewalks in Freedom as one reason the city wouldn't want to annex the area.

As envisioned by Smith and Freedom Fire Chief Ben Evans, the contract would place three firefighters on duty one-third of the time at Watsonville Station Two on Airport Boulevard. The rest of the time it would be manned by four firefighters.

Currently Freedom operates with one fireman and Station Two with two firefighters most of the time.

"It's nothing short of a miracle there hasn't been a serious accident (with one fireman) responding to a call," said one man.