

REGISTER*PAJARONIAN
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Department of Forestry takes issue with Aptos fire officials

The chief of the California Department of Forestry (CDF) fire department in Santa Cruz County has taken issue with Aptos fire officials who say his department isn't equipped to fight structure fires.

Forestry Chief Robert Voss said this and other statements made by Aptos Fire Chief Richard Chinn, his board chairman Richard Duchscher and county official Duane Smith are inaccurate.

The claim that the Department of Forestry can't fight structure fires was made when Smith, who is director of the Local Agency Formation Commission, met with the Aptos fire officials to discuss the possible inclusion of the rapidly-developing Day Valley and Redwood Drive areas into the Aptos Fire Protection District.

Those areas are served by the Department of Forestry, but at the meeting with Smith and the Aptos fire board, it was claimed that Aptos firemen routinely respond to fire alarms there, arriving long before trucks from the forestry station in Corralitos.

Chinn said that the Department of Forestry "routinely requests" his department to respond to alarms in those areas at the same time trucks are being sent from Corralitos.

Smith said that the areas should be annexed to the Aptos fire district, but if the residents refuse, "they would be put on notice that you (Aptos) would not respond to fires there until the Department of Forestry get there."

It was Duchscher who said the Department of Forestry "is not equipped to fight structure fires, so they call us."

Voss disagrees with all these statements,

conceding only that the suggestion of establishing a volunteer fire station in the Redwood Drive area "would be good, and it is logical for the Aptos fire district to provide this service as it would eliminate a small, isolated island from the county protection area."

But, Voss continued, the Department of Forestry "does take issue with the statements made concerning (our) not being equipped to fight structure fires and routinely requesting the Aptos fire district to respond to fires outside the fire district. These statements are inaccurate."

Department of Forestry, Voss, says, has structure fire-fighting equipment on its trucks, and through its contract with Santa Cruz County to provide fire protection in the unincorporated areas, "administers the Corralitos volunteer fire department as well as several other volunteer departments throughout Santa Cruz County. Thus, the county fire protection system includes CDF paid firefighters and county funded volunteers. The CDF-County Fire department maintains two fire engines, one tanker and one rescue squad for structure fire and emergency responses from the Corralitos station," Voss declared.

The claim that the Department of Forestry "routinely requests" the Aptos fire department to respond to its calls is just not so, Voss says. "This is the exception rather than the rule."

In fact, Voss claims, Aptos firemen act on their own most of the time. "The Aptos fire district has routinely responded to structure and wildland fires outside of the fire district on their own volition without a request from the CDF-County Fire. Often they respond

outside their area without notification or with delayed notification to CDF-County Fire through county communications."

Voss says that his studies show that the Aptos trucks can get to "some portions" of the Day Valley area faster than his own, and as a result, the Department of Forestry two years ago called for a volunteer department to be established there during this fiscal year. This would require the approval of the supervisors, Voss said, and would probably entail an increase in the county fire tax rate.

At the meeting at which the Day Valley annexation was discussed, Duchscher said the Department of Forestry was worried that its tax base was being eroded by such annexations. "CDF says they won't be able to offer Class A service," he said.

"I don't think they are now," Smith answered.

Voss's answer to this is:

"It is the policy of the California Department of Forestry to take a position of initiative and positive, professional leadership in planning and implementing a cooperative, unified, and integrated fire protection system as agreed to by the state and any local governmental jurisdiction, in accordance with the will and the needs of the people and their ability to pay. The CDF has the obligation as well as the ability to identify fire protection problems and to provide local government jurisdictions with alternative solutions to those problems."

Voss concluded: "The question is not whether CDF-County fire can provide Class A service, but at what tax rate does the public want to pay for increased service by CDF-County Fire or a fire protection district."