

Fire board debates shift for paramedics

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Aptos/La Selva firefighters and members of the district's board met last night to consider a proposal to shift from paramedic vans to fire engines equipped with medical supplies for responding to medical emergencies.

A decision won't be made on any changes in the system until the board meets next week to hammer out a budget for the coming fiscal year.

The proposal, presented by Deputy Chief Philip Scofield, is seen as a cost-cutting measure for the district, which faces up to \$400,000 in budget reductions. It would be the first time Santa Cruz County has used an engine-based paramedic system.

Currently, there is one paramedic van staffed with two paramedics at Rio del Mar's Station 2. The proposal calls for two fire engines each staffed with one paramedic, a firefighter, and a captain at Station 2 and Station 1, located on the western edge of the Aptos district.

"It could help us solve our long standing problem of getting engine staffing to three," Scofield said.

The proposed change was prompted by the fact that Station 1 and 2 respond to about 86 percent of all medical emergency calls, which themselves account for 70 percent of all emergency calls, said Scofield. He stressed that response times would be the same or faster in most areas of the three-station district, but that there may be slower responses in part of the Station 1 area. "It would give us twice the response capability," he said. "It is good for back-to-back activity and multiple responses. One always values life over property."

Scofield also pointed out that more than 80 percent of all fires occur in these two areas, making it logical to house the three-person engines there.

Eliminating paramedic vans from front-line service could also reduce costs by as much as \$60,000, said Fire Chief Chuck Mornard.

But the Fire Fighters Associa-

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tion came out against the proposal, expressing concern that it would lead to a reduction in overall service. Districts would no longer have "scoop and run" capabilities and would instead have to rely totally on commercial ambulance services to transport victims to hospitals, members pointed out.

Fire Board President Steve Mills concurred. "There will be a decrease in service," he said. But faced with the possibility of major slashes in the district's budget, the change may be inevitable.

"The thing that makes this so impossible is that we don't know how much the state will give us," said Mills. "We've got to make a budget without knowing how much we've got."

Fire officials will meet this week with the county's Health Services Agency to verify what ambulance services would be available if the proposal is adopted.

In other matters, the board decided to eliminate non-essential expenditures until a new budget is drawn, and Chief Mornard announced that consulting firm Ralph Andersen and Associates has been hired to complete a \$15,500 feasibility study on merging the Aptos/La Selva, Central, Scotts Valley, and Branciforte fire districts into one.

Deputy Chief Scofield announced that five cellular telephones were donated to the fire district by Cellular One to assist in disaster response.