

Ban on lofts angers parents

A ban on reading lofts in Aptos classrooms has angered a group of junior high school parents, who are threatening legal action against the fire district.

In January a 6-foot high loft in an Aptos Junior High School classroom was ordered removed by the assistant fire chief.

At that time he reportedly said the loft was unsafe and too large.

Shortly after the loft's removal the state fire marshal's office released a list of guidelines for constructing classroom lofts.

According to the junior high parents, the loft which had just been removed met those guidelines once the loft's floor was coated with fire retardant paint.

When the teacher who had constructed the loft, Ron Dodd, asked if it could be put back into his classroom again, he said fire Chief Richard Chinn agreed it could.

However, while the teacher was going through the process of re-submitting the plans to the school district the Aptos fire district board met and adopted a ban on classroom lofts.

A spokesman for the parents told school board members last night that legally the fire board has no authority to adopt such a policy.

Parent T. R. Dixon said an attorney told the parents that the fire board only can interpret existing fire code regulations and cannot draw up new policies.

"That's not true," Chief Chinn said this morning. The fire board does have the authority to set tougher standards than those handed down by the state, he added.

The fire chief said he supported the ban on lofts because it would take too much supervision to make sure schools were complying with the guidelines.

"If we allow one, we allow them everywhere," he said, adding that it would take a full-time inspector to insure that the lofts were safe.

The loft at Aptos Junior High did meet the new guidelines, he said, except that parts of it needed to be flameproofed.

"All the board's interested in are the legal entanglements involved if some child gets hurt," he said.

Chinn said his concern is that by the time his department found out a loft had been built or altered and then fire safety tests made on it, a child could have been hurt.

For example, he said, the teacher may decide he does not like the color of the fire-proof bean bag chair in a loft and decide to replace it with a chair that has not been inspected.

Chinn said the loft never should have been put in when it was.

"He's (the teacher) been illegal from the day he put it in," the chief said, because the teacher did not notify the fire department of his plans.

The teacher, Ron Dodd, said today the plans were submitted to the school district but it was an unintentional "oversight" that they were not given to the fire department.

He said the relationship between himself

and the fire department has been "fairly antagonistic" but as he started to give the details, he stopped himself and said:

"I'll save that in case we go to court."

The parent who addressed the school board last night said the parents and teacher have no complaint with attempts to make the loft safer.

"We're not concerned with making problems with anybody," Dixon said, "but there seems to be no room for compromise."

His concern is that the loft does meet the state's guidelines yet the local fire board will not allow it in the classroom.

"The quarrel we have is that the Aptos fire board has taken a tougher stand," he said.

On Tuesday the fire board will meet again and this time parents say they will be there.

Last night the school board was presented with a petition from Aptos Junior High parents and students. Trustees told Superintendent Wallace Raynor they would like a district representative at the fire board meeting.

"I'm doubtful that the board will change its mind," Chief Chinn said, but the parents

can address the board anyway, he added.

Three other lofts at Rio del Mar School, which had been in the classrooms for four years, also were taken down in January.

Principal Jim Follis said his classrooms had been inspected by fire marshals several times when the lofts were there so he did not know their presence was a violation.

"We were sitting there kind of smug, we thought," he said.

Mintie White School has reading lofts in two of its classrooms, Principal Ann Soldo said.

Dave Williams, the Watsonville Fire Department's fire inspector, has yet to tell the school to remove them, she said.

Trustee Bruce Richardson, who is a lawyer, last night said he wanted a legal clarification on whether or not the fire board could order such a ban.

If it does not have that authority, he said, "I'd put the loft back in and let Chief Chinn send the sheriff out like he did with the candles."

Chinn has cited two churches in the last few years for using candles during services, which he said was a fire code violation. Charges were not filed in either case.

APTOS BRANCH
LIBRARY

7695 SOQUEL DRIVE
APTOS, CALIFORNIA 95003

REFERENCE