

Fire district merger talks collapse

Central County Fire directors walked out of a joint meeting with members of the Capitola Fire Protection District board of directors last week.

The walkout came after Capitola director Wayne Fontes made a motion midway through the agenda for the Capitola district to approach the city of Capitola about merging the now independent fire district into the city.

Fontes has been a long-time supporter of the idea of merging with the city.

The two boards had met to discuss consolidation of the two districts — a move that was supported by both fire chiefs and, reportedly, by 75 percent of the department's firefighters.

Fontes said he made his motion to approach the city so abruptly because he wanted to go home Monday evening and attend a family reunion.

The action, however, caught the other participants by surprise and the Central Fire board members walked out after realizing there was nothing left to discuss after Fontes' motion, seconded by director Richard Mendonca, was approved on a voice vote.

Capitola's decision angered Central Fire officials.

Central Fire Chief Harry Rowe said there will be no further contacts between his district and the Capitola directors.

"I won't subject my board again," Rowe said, "to that kind of insulting treatment."

"I'm going to recommend that we tend to our own business and the chips fall where they may," Rowe added.

Ron Pederson, chairman of the Central board, later concurred with Rowe. "There was really no reason to go on with the meeting. We were asked by Capitola to have a joint meeting to talk about consolidation. But we never even got a chance to ask question or present our side. The other directors there were flabbergasted.

"We will never be subjected to embarrassment, ridicule or humiliation like that again," Pederson said.

Central, which was formed by a consolidation of the Live Oak and Soquel fire districts, will continue to honor its mutual aid and automatic aid agreements with Capitola. Those agreements call for both fire departments to respond to fires and alarms at, for example, the Capitola Mall, Kings Plaza and Orchard Supply Hardware, Nob Hill and the Main Street restaurant complex.

Fontes said that he would like the City Council to agree to call a special election in November to get residents' approval of the city takeover of the fire district.

The council, in earlier, abortive meetings with the fire directors, have already discarded the election idea. Councilmembers have contended that both governing boards have the power to merge the district with the city and, without evidence of public outcry, it would be senseless to spend the \$10,000-\$15,000 needed to hold a special election or even add the issue to the ballot at a general election.

Fontes feels however that an election should be held.

"This has been talked about so much, but the public really hasn't gotten involved," Fontes said.

Fontes said he'll probably ask the City Council at its April 25 meeting to schedule another meeting with the fire district.

Fontes, who pointed out that he had run for the fire board twice with just one plank in his platform — merge with the city, said he wants to preserve local control over the fire department. "I like the feeling that the public body such as the City Council has to be responsible. In a large fire department, people don't have as much input.

"One thing," Fontes added, "that I have trouble with Central is that they have a five man board and if someone wanted to represent Capitola, they would have to run for a seat.

"And even if Capitola (directors) did get on the Central board, they would only be two of seven members and that doesn't seem healthy for Capitola."

Fontes also said he believes Capitola has potentially greater resources to support a fire department then does a special district, such as Capitola Fire or Central. Fontes doesn't like the idea of the special districts depending on yearly allocations of special district augmentation funds from the state legislature to supplement the property tax revenues that supply about half of a fire district's annual financial support.

But the fire board is not solidly behind the move towards the city.

Board chairman Max Kludt said last week that he still favors consolidating with the Central Fire District.

REFERENCE

"I support consolidation (with Central) over a merger with the city," Kludt said.

Kludt said he feels the two departments, merged into one, would have the resources to provide adequate fire protection to the city as well as Live Oak and Soquel with major additional expenses.

"We can do the job without upsetting the status quo," Kludt said. "Central is everything that Capitola could hope for," he added.

Rowe said he believes Capitola, as well as Central residents, would have benefited from a consolidation.

His plans called for maintaining a fire station "in the general area of the existing Capitola fire station.

"There are 1,000 calls a year in a 2.2 square mile area," Rowe added, "and it is very important to maintain a station in Capitola."

There would be a change in the manning policies for the Capitola station. The station now generally has four firefighters on duty. Three of those answer fire alarms and other emergency calls immediately while the fourth comes with a second fire engine when off-duty or volunteer firefighters get to the station.

If the Central merger had gone through, Rowe said, the Capitola station would have been manned around the clock by three firefighters with the extra forces used to fill out a two-person crew at Central's Thurber Lane station.

But on any fire, two fire engines with a total of six firefighters, would be sent on the initial alarm and two other engines available for immediate response if needed.