

Aptos Fire Group Offers Ideas

By DON RIGHETTI
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The committee investigating the inspection procedures of the Aptos Fire Department came up with some ideas during a Monday meeting for making the public think of the firemen as protectors rather than bosses.

District residents have been disturbed about the department's shark-tooth fire code and the steamroller method by which the department has been enforcing it.

Nobody appears to think the department isn't doing an overall exemplary job; just that it's cantankerous about doing it.

Among the moves the committee decided to launch are: 1. Set up better training for firemen in inspection procedures and fire code enforcement; 2. Make the public more aware of what the fire department is doing, rather than springing any actions by surprise; 3. Determine whether the department meticulously has been following its manual on inspection procedures.

Committee member Harry Bright, chairman of the Council of Improvement Associations, talked to Bob Thompson and James Kerr, two department firemen who also are members of the committee. "Your image is not as good as the work you do merits," he told them. "People are scared to death to invite the fire department in for an inspection."

He said the specific words which seems to have sparked the current public turmoil are "district attorney," "warrant" and "enforce." The whole thing might have been avoided, he added, by a gentler approach.

The Poor Clares nuns, he said, were "badly frightened," and still were frightened a week ago.

It was an inspection of the convent and the decision the nuns should not use lighted candles in one of their traditional rituals which sparked the current public outcry of resentment.

The burden in such inspection cases falls on the captains in charge of the inspections, Bright said. He noted the captains may be following the manual, but need to improve their approach.

Stewart Davis of the fire district board said that in the overflow public meeting on the department demeanor that only a few complaints came actually from the people who thought they had been wronged. He thought the prime reason for the complaints was in the department's reliance on the letter, rather than the spirit, of the fire code.

Bright, a Pacific Telephone and Telegraph employe, said, "It took our crew four months to study the code."

"We have a horrendous code," Davis agreed, adding the department doesn't have enough men to enforce all of its aspects or explain them to the public.

Committee member Clay Ward said he didn't see how Fire Chief Richard Chinn could be so busy he couldn't oversee the inspections at least to some extent. He asked Thompson how many inspections a day the department performs.

About eight, Thompson said, and three-fourths of those require some corrective action.

Bright was critical of Chinn's excuse that he hadn't been informed of the Poor Clares inspection ahead of time, and that if he had, he would have performed it differently.

Committee member Betty Harrison asked if the Aptos fire code is stricter than the state's.

Not in its general content, Thompson said; only in a few instances. The central argument, Thompson said, is not that the Aptos code is so much stricter than the state's but just that it is more strictly enforced in Aptos than in many other places.

The moves the committee members decided to make were parceled out among the various committeemen who were asked to report on their progress at the next meeting.

Sentinel

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