

Fire tax in Aptos draws opposition

The Aptos Fire District will ask voters June 7 to approve a \$75-per-home annual service charge to keep the district in operation in the event the state cuts off its annual subsidy.

The district needs approval from two-thirds of the voters on June 7, and if the turnout Tuesday night was any indication of the prevailing attitude, winning approval will be an uphill fight.

Directors say they would not assess the fee unless the state Legislature cuts some or all of the \$609,000 the district now receives in Prop. 13 bail-out funds. If there is only a reduction, as opposed to the complete elimination of the state aid, the fees would be cut accordingly.

The district will be forced to cut service if the state halts the bail-out payments (something Gov. George Deukmejian now says he doesn't want to do) and if the election fails.

Acting Fire Chief Al Forbes said the department would close the Rio del Mar fire station and start laying off firemen.

The paramedic program would be canceled, not because of cost (it only costs the district an extra \$12,000 a year), but because the paramedic-firemen have the least seniority, and under the department's Civil Service-type rules, they would be the first to be fired.

The rollback of service to the pre-1973 level would probably drive fire insurance rates up substantially, Forbes said. Commercial property owners would probably see an immediate increase of 19 to 50 percent in their fire insurance rates. The increase for homeowners and renters would not be as dramatic or sudden, but eventually the rates would probably go up 10 to 40 percent, he said.

Fewer than two dozen district residents turned out for the public hearing at the main fire station Tuesday night.

Several questioned the need for the standby tax, and suggested it was time that the district and the Board of Supervisors pressure the Legislature to find a permanent financing solution for fire departments.

Seacliff resident Don Griffin said many of his neighbors were so opposed to the fee that they wouldn't even come to the hearing. Griffin conceded that the fire board has a "problem" in that it doesn't know what it will get from the state each year.

"But the assessed valuation of the county has doubled (since the passage of Prop. 13) and

people say we are paying enough taxes.

"The problem here is the distribution of those taxes. You should be going to the Board of Supervisors and the Legislature for a bigger share of those taxes," Griffin told fire board chairman Richard Duchscher.

"That's an excellent point," Duchscher conceded, "but that's like the tail wagging the dog.

"The state is in the hole and I don't think (state Sen.) Henry Mello is going to do much for us.

"We are just asking the people in the district to cover our rear ends," Duchscher said. "I don't disagree with you, but if you want the level of service to stay the same, you have to cover us."

Hap Hasty, one of the most persistent questioners at the hearing, said: "I can tell you that I live in a neighborhood with \$200,000 to \$250,000 homes. I've polled the neighbors and this isn't going to fly."

Hasty said his neighbors are already struggling to meet the mortgage and tax payments on their homes.

Other speakers, like L.R. Brewster of Seacliff, thought the proposal was a reasonable one, especially if it saves the paramedic program.

"These paramedics saved my wife's life, and there is something wrong with anyone who will bitch about paying \$200 to \$250."

He got a sustained round of applause from the audience, which included on- and off-duty firemen and their families.

Under the proposed service charges, mobile home parks would pay a maximum of \$50 a year per mobile home or travel trailer, and apartment owners would also pay \$50 a unit.

Motels, hotels and rooming houses would be assessed \$25 per living or sleeping unit.

Rural property owners in the district would be charged \$90 for five- to 19.9-acre parcels, \$100 for 20- to 49.9-acre homesites, and \$110 for homesites 50 acres and up.

In the commercial sector, retail stores, offices, medical offices, banks, savings and loans, coin-operated laundries and drive-in restaurants would pay a maximum of \$200 a year.

Service stations, auto repair shops, food processing and manufacturing plants, warehouses, auto agencies and used car lots would pay \$250 a year.