

Fire directors rework merger shopping list

By BOB SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Capitola fire directors have gone back to the drawing board, so to speak, in an attempt to draw up a shopping list of new stations, equipment and manpower they want if they become a subsidiary of the City of Capitola.

The board had been scheduled to appoint its representatives to a special district-city negotiating committee to decide if an election on the issue should be held and, if so, what the voters should be asked to approve.

Instead, after nearly an hour of recriminations and argument among the fire directors, they asked their "fact-finding" committee of Wayne Fontes and Gene Warren to meet with Fire Chief Jerry Bowles to develop the list of items they want the city to finance.

The Capitola City Council three weeks ago appointed City Councilman Dennis Beltram and City Manager Steve Burrell to represent the city in the talks with the fire district.

Those talks are apparently on hold now until the fire directors approve their list.

The directors still don't know the merger would be accomplished — whether the fire department would become a municipal fire department or a subsidiary fire district. So far as the day-to-day operations of the department are concerned, it would mean little one way or the other. But financially, the city would lose more than \$300,000 in state aid the present district now receives if the district became a municipal fire department.

That aid would still be available, Burrell said this morning, if the now independent district became a subsidiary district with the City Council acting as the district board of directors.

The fire board's goal now is to get a commitment from the City Council to "match or exceed" the level of service that a merger with the Central Fire District (which covers Live Oak and Soquel, and portions of Capitola along 41st Avenue and in the New Brighton State Beach area) would provide for Capitola residents. That goal, according to Capitola Fire Captain Charlie

Howard, would be to have two companies responding to fires and other major emergencies in the city.

Howard is one of the few firefighters in the Capitola department openly supporting a city takeover of the department.

"We have found that Central Fire has presented a good plan. I happen to believe that a city fire department, built up to be comparable to Central, size-wise per capita and per square mile, that we could do better on response times and handling medical emergencies. But I think we have to take the plan that Central has presented, which is a good workable plan, and we have to build our department so it is comparable to what they have to offer us."

Howard was also critical of the board's desire for an election before it would commit to a city merger. "You have 10 people who take care of the same citizenry (the fire board and City Council) who should be able to decide if we join Central or the city."

Howard is apparently in a minority among the department's firefighters.

Capitola Firefighters Association president Steve Howton reiterated to the board last night the group's position that the district should consolidate with Central.

Howton said the firefighters' reasons for favoring a Central consolidation include: improved administration; more efficient and safe fire fighting; an increase from one to four on-duty engine companies; increased resources including an aerial ladder truck, 2,000 gallon tanker, rescue equipment; better insurance rates for commercial businesses, and better wages, benefits and promotional opportunities for employees.

"Our main reason for not wanting to become a city fire department is that there is still no plan from our board or from the city to maintain or improve fire protection for our residents," Howton added. "There has been much talk of losing 'local control,' moving the Capitola station and rearranging manpower. We feel that any changes made would be for the mutual improvement of fire protection for all parties."

REFERENCE

WATSONVILLE
REGISTER-PAJARONIAN
May 14, 1985