

Fire board delays hard decisions on cost cutting

By BOB SMITH
STAFF WRITER

After acknowledging that their department is in deep financial trouble, Aptos/La Selva Fire District directors last night postponed any major cost-cutting actions — such as layoffs — for three months.

Board members did approve a new contract with members of the Aptos/La Selva Firefighters Association, granting them raises of 3.4 to 3.7 percent, retroactive to July 1, 1992.

They also okayed a proposal to mothball the department's paramedic ambulance van and send one paramedic/fireman on a fire engine to medical emergencies.

The new contract, with its retroactive provisions, will cost \$50,500 in back wages and benefits.

It raises the top salary of a firefighter to \$40,335 annually. Paramedic/firefighters receive another 12 percent for the hours or days they work in a paramedic capacity.

A top-step captain would earn \$50,016 before overtime.

By comparison, Fire Chief Chuck Mornard — under a contract approved last fall — makes \$72,916 annually, Deputy Chief Phil Scofield, \$63,718, and Fire Marshall Gail McCloud, \$58,502.

The Aptos/La Selva district, like other fire-protection districts, is waiting to see how much local property taxes are grabbed by the state this year.

Last year, the district lost \$345,000 in local tax revenues. This year, estimates have ranged from \$400,000 to nearly \$1 million in lost revenues — depending on what kind of compromise is finally reached by various factions in the state Legislature and the governor's office.

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— Director Don Griffin

fire stations caused by vacations, illness or injury.

Most of the district's overtime would have been eliminated in Mornard's budget. Right now, the district has a policy of hiring off-duty firefighters and captains back at time-and-a-half to fill vacancies. Most of that overtime would be eliminated under the reduced staffing.

A secretarial position in the district's administrative office would be cut to half-time as would a fire-prevention specialist in the department's fire-prevention bureau.

The staffing levels would impact the public most often during emergencies. Mornard said after the meeting that the department would still adhere to very strict federal safety standards. For example, safety rules now call for three firefighters to be on the scene before performing a rescue in a burning building — two to go inside and a third (captain or battalion chief) to remain outside to supervise and monitor the rescuers' safety.

The district has considered calling an election for a fire protection tax or, as an alternative, trying a new method of imposing a benefit fee.

Board members last night allowed the deadline for getting on the November election ballot to pass without putting the fire-protection tax on the ballot.

Greg Joseph, president of the Aptos/La Selva Firefighters Association, said his membership opposed the fire-protection tax at this time because they don't believe it would pass.

They do support, Joseph said, the idea of a benefit fee once the district has pared down its operations to the "bare bones" without laying off anyone.

Last week, the district was looking at a budget scenario calling for \$400,000 in budget cuts and the layoff of three firefighters and some support personnel.

Last night, however, Mornard presented a budget proposal calling for \$700,000 in cuts — primarily through the layoffs of six firefighters and the elimination of half-time positions in the department's fire prevention and administration areas.

Mornard's proposal would have kept all three district fire stations open, but reduced the number of firefighters on duty.

One paramedic would be on duty at any one time, assigned to ride a fire engine stationed at Station 2 in Rio del Mar.

The Rio del Mar station would be manned by a battalion chief, a firefighter, a firefighter/paramedic and one "floater" who would normally be a qualified paramedic but available for firefighting duties anywhere in the district.

Station 1, on Soquel Drive in front of Mar Vista elementary school, would be manned by a captain, a firefighter and a floater firefighter. Station 3 in La Selva Beach, the quietest of the three stations, would be staffed by a captain and a firefighter.

The floaters would be assigned to cover vacancies at any of the

In all, the budget proposed last night would have cut \$700,222 from the district's operating budget next fiscal year.

Directors said they weren't ready to make cuts that deep in the district's staffing.

Several suggested using about \$175,000 in the district's reserves to avoid layoffs for the first quarter of the 1993-94 fiscal year.

The only director opposed was Ray Garcia who bluntly labeled it "deficit spending."

Garcia asked for a study on the absolute minimum staffing that the district could keep and still protect its residents.

"What is the minimum force of persons we need to meet the district's responsibilities?" he asked. "What is the minimum we need to look after the 20,000 people and 11 square miles in the district?"

Other directors didn't support Garcia's position.

Board president Steve Mills opposed any layoffs in the first quarter (July-September). "It's not proper to give layoffs with such short notice. We don't know for certain what the state will do with us."

Director Don Griffin agreed with Mills about postponing the layoffs, but added: "I don't like laying anyone off but we have to look at the total staff. If we go that way and then find out that the 'hit' is greater than we expect, then other people will lose their jobs."

Director Curtis Gabriel suggested a salary cut as one way to stave off the layoffs.

A five percent reduction would save \$106,000, Mornard replied, implying that it would take close to 35 percent in salary cuts to achieve all of the \$700,222 in proposed savings.

Garcia ended up being the only vote against a motion by Griffin to suspend any layoffs until Oct. 1, 1993.