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Green Sheet

Fire districts may disappear

Fire & Fire protection to 1979

What's the future for the Capitola and Live Oak fire protection districts?

Their directors and fire chiefs met with four Capitola city councilmen, Capitola City Manager Max Kludt, Santa Cruz Fire Chief Chuck Schneider and Duane Smith, executive director of the county Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) last Thursday night to begin exploring that question.

The future appears especially grim for the Live Oak fire protection district.

And although not physically threatened by encroaching cities as is Live Oak, the future status of the Capitola fire protection district is also clouded.

"It is quite clear that the cities of Santa Cruz and Capitola will be creeping towards Live Oak in time," Smith told the group meeting in the Capitola city hall. "No one knows to what degree or how fast, but it is inevitable."

Annexations by western Live Oak to Santa Cruz are the biggest threat to the Live Oak fire department.

"Santa Cruz, on annexing, would detach these areas from the Live Oak department," Smith said.

"In the past, on annexation to Capitola, authorization was given to detach from Live Oak and annex them to the Capitola fire district as well," Smith said.

That LAFCO policy changed when the city of Capitola won LAFCO approval to annex Sutter Hill to the city. Part of the property is inside the Live Oak fire district, and the city was not permitted to automatically detach it and turn it over to the Capitola fire district.

"It seems to me," Smith said, "that this is not fair since both (fire districts) are autonomous. In the future, Capitola will be served by portions of three fire districts — Capitola, Live Oak and Soquel — and the problems will increase."

"I feel the key is what the Capitola city council will do.

"Their alternatives are forming their own city department, form a subsidiary district with the city council as the board of directors, or lastly, as recommended by the Sierra Group report, consolidate the Live Oak, Capitola and Soquel fire districts.

"Does Capitola want to be served by a multitude of fire districts, a subsidiary district or a consolidated one?" Smith asked.

What about the revenue limitations of SB 90 — a law that now plagues the Capitola fire

protection district, asked district chairman Richard Mendonca.

"There is one way to get around that," Smith replied. "If the city decided to take over the Capitola fire district (possible if 70 per cent of the district is inside the city limits), I assume they could not support the fire department on the present city tax rate. There would be a tax election, but if the city said the tax rate would be the same, it would probably pass.

"The other route would be to consolidate the two fire districts," Smith said. "You can dissolve the district with the lower tax rate (Capitola) and annex it to the higher tax rate district (Live Oak)."

Considering the recommendation in the Sierra Group report for an area-wide consolidated fire district, asked Santa Cruz chief Chuck Schneider, what would be LAFCO's position on the city of Capitola taking over the fire department.

"If a petition came before LAFCO," replied Smith, "I would be seeking as much input from county Fire Marshal Mel Angel and others, as possible. But in reality, it would be pretty hard to deny the city permission to set up its own department."

Answering Live Oak board director Bill Reddehase, Smith said the spheres of influence established for the fire protection district would have no effect on the expansion of either the cities of Santa Cruz or Capitola into Live Oak.

"Being blunt," replied Smith, "it is generally recognized that cities are better able to provide services."

"We've proved that we can provide better services than Capitola," countered Reddehase.

"It is agreed that cities can provide better services," repeated Smith, "because they have better sources of revenue.

"Once an annexation to Santa Cruz takes place, the area can be detached from the Live Oak Fire Protection District within one year. If the city of Capitola has a fire department, then your sphere of influence would be pulled back."

"You're looking at the potential demise of these two districts and potentially of Soquel if they are annexed too," commented Mendonca.

The next move is up to the Capitola city council to establish its policy on a possible takeover of the Capitola fire protection district.