

City eyeing takeover of fire department

A consultant will study the advantages of the City of Capitola taking over the Capitola Fire Protection District, the City Council decided Thursday night.

Council members authorized City Manager Steve Burrell to hire a special consultant, for not more than \$2,000, to examine the feasibility of the district becoming a city fire department.

Burrell and City Attorney Richard Manning will work with the consultant on the legal and financial ramifications of the takeover.

The unanimous decision Thursday night by the council to pursue the idea of a city fire department was favorably received by the three fire directors in the audience.

Fire Director Bob Bucher told the council that a majority of the fire board supported the idea of the city absorbing the fire district.

The decision also means that the fire district won't be joining Soquel and Live Oak in a proposed Mid-County Fire Agency that would be operated by a joint powers authority.

The two fire districts plan to meet Tuesday, 7:30 p.m., at the Soquel fire station to start planning the new agency.

Burrell told the City Council in a memo that the district has a current budget shortfall of \$150,000 that is being covered by using reserves that the district had accumulated for a building fund.

Burrell said the shortfall will continue next year and will exhaust the district's financial resources.

Fire director Bob Cook suggested the possibility of city "bailout" to the fire district next year by agreeing to hire a fire chief for the leaderless department.

"It is not a full-time job," Cook told the council. "I think it could probably be done in three or four days a month — 25 percent of a person's time each month. It could be an extra employee or extra duties for a current employee."

Councilman Michael Routh said he wouldn't go along with that concept of city aid to the district.

"If the city has control of the fire department, fine," Routh said. "But if you just want to tap our coffers, no dice. That's not benefiting the city or the fire department."

"Fine," responded Cook. "A lot of people say they want a city fire department ... and we're not opposed to it."

In his memo to the City Council, Burrell warned the council members that the city will be assuming a heavy burden.

"Given the shortfall they are experiencing, it would take a substantial contribution from the city's general fund to assume all their responsibilities.

"If the city had no other choice," Burrell added, "it would probably be possible to come up with the funds needed by cutting other functions."

Manning told the council that the city's legal options in aiding the fire district were severely limited.

Reiterating an analysis made several years ago, Manning told the council that there was only one way for the city to make a contribution to the fire district

while it remains an independent agency.

Manning said the city could purchase equipment for it, but it couldn't pay part of its employees' salaries or other operating costs.

For the city to take the district over completely, or make it a subsidiary district, Manning said, involves complex political processes including approvals from the county Local Agency Formation Commission and the Board of Supervisors.

But he said there is one simple, but lengthy, alternative. The city could withdraw from the fire district, Manning said, setting up its own municipal fire department.

That would leave Opal Cliffs and portions of Soquel

without a fire department.

Manning said the action could be accomplished without LAFCO or county approval, but requires a full year to implement.

"Everything else requires a LAFCO hearing and then supervisors' approval," Manning said.

Burrell said the consultant may find that the best course of action is for the district to join Soquel and Live Oak in the joint powers authority.

But the council members told Burrell to direct the consultant to weigh his study towards a city takeover, concentrating on finding ways for the city to accomplish the takeover instead of a totally objective look at the problem.