

Larkin Valley votes down annexation to fire district

By JAMIE MARKS
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Larkin Valley residents voted down a special tax that would have resulted in the annexation of the area to Freedom Fire District.

The result of the mail ballot was counted Tuesday night, showing that 165 (57.9 percent) voted in favor of the tax to 120 (42.1 percent) who voted no.

Because it was a vote on a tax, the measure needed two-thirds approval to pass.

A total of 286 ballots out of 609 eligible votes were cast, but one ballot was returned without registering a vote.

Whether Freedom Fire will continue to serve the rural Larkin Valley area remains in doubt, Freedom Fire Chief Ben Evans said. That decision will be made by the Freedom Fire Board of Directors at its next meeting, slated for Aug. 15.

Evans said he was very disappointed in the vote.

"We lost. It's a killer not getting the two-thirds approval," he said. "It's the third time we've tried to raise a tax through a vote (since the passage of Propo-

sition 13). We've never won and it makes you kind of reluctant to ever try it again."

Since 1982, Freedom Fire has contracted with the county to provide fire protection and medical aid to residents in the Larkin Valley, Calabasas and Buena Vista area that are technically outside the district's boundaries.

Most of the homes are on an acre or more of land, with private wells and springs serving as the sole water source.

Previous to the contract, fire protection was provided by the California Department of Forestry, through a contract with the county.

A major reason for having Freedom Fire assume the responsibility of fire protection was the time it takes to respond to an emergency.

Freedom can arrive at a fire call in the Larkin Valley area within four minutes, while CDF takes anywhere from 12 to 15 minutes from its Corralitos station, Evans said.

In the special election, residents voted down the \$80-a-year fee for the continuation of the service. If the fee had been ap-

proved, the Local Agency Formation Commission would have finalized the annexation of the Larkin Valley area to the service boundaries of the Freedom Fire District.

Freedom Fire gets some \$24,000 a year via its contract with the county to serve the Larkin Valley area. Evans estimated it costs about \$40,000 to provide the service.

"If it had passed, we were planning to purchase a water tender, which that area needs," Evans said. The truck could carry 2,000 gallons of water to a fire. Since there are no hydrants on any of the roads in the proposed annexation area, the tender is a badly needed piece of equipment, Evans said.

Compared to other jurisdictions, the Larkin Valley residents pay a nominal fee for fire service. Current charges are assessed at 3 cents of assessed valuation, while residents within the Freedom Fire boundaries pay 58 cents per assessed valuation. Aptos residents pay \$1.05 per assessed valuation for the service from Aptos/La Selva Fire District, Evans said.