

FIRE PROTECTION RP 9/12/91 p.1

Fees cut, but Aptos accidents still pricey

By BOB SMITH
STAFF WRITER

In one unanimous vote yesterday afternoon, Aptos-La Selva fire directors cut the revenue from their new service fee in half.

Last year, the district adopted an ordinance allowing the department to charge fees for most of its emergency services, including medical assistance, fires, automobile accidents and hazardous materials cleanup.

District residents would have been largely exempted from the fees — except in cases where they were involved in some type of illegal activity.

But out-of-district residents would have been sent bills ranging in the hundreds of dollars for the

assistance the department rendered.

The district implemented the fees after the state legislature allowed the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors to charge cities, schools and special districts fees for collecting property taxes.

The district directors yesterday afternoon approved a resolution — a set of operating rules for Fire Chief Chuck Mornard and his staff — that severely limits who will be sent bills.

As it now stands, the only people likely to be billed are those involved in vehicle accidents, illegal burns (burning trash or debris without a burn permit or on a non-burn day) and people responsible for hazardous material spills.

And Mornard has the power to exempt those on an individual case-by-case basis.

In two months, department employees had collected billing information from 60 people assisted by firemen. The calls ranged from a man hit by a train to a car fire on Highway 1.

The directors' action yesterday afternoon cut the number of bills that will be mailed out next week from 60 to 30.

Even so, Mornard is projecting that the district could recover \$47,000 over 12 months if the experience of the first two months is any indication.

Those receiving bills will have 90 days to pay the bill. If they don't, the district will take them to

court — small claims court if the amount is under \$5,000; Municipal or Superior Court for larger amounts.

Mornard drafted the resolution approved by the board, but he also warned that the district might be forced to adopt a far more stringent fee collection policy if the legislature — for example — cuts off the Special District Augmentation Fund (SDAF). The SDAF is a pool of money passed down annually from the state to the counties that is used to help alleviate the revenue shortfalls suffered by special property tax-supported districts ever since the 1978 passage of Prop. 13.

The Aptos-La Selva fire district
See FEES page 7

Fires & Feels
FEES Protection
RP

From Page 1 4/12/91

this year received \$730,000 from the SDAF, and if the state takes that money away in an attempt to ease its own budget crisis, "we might start charging for everything."

Another possibility for the district would be a special assessment on each piece of property, but that requires voter approval. Directors informally discussed that possibility after yesterday's meeting but said there might not be time to put such a measure on the November 1991 ballot if the legislature waited until late August to approve the state budget — as it did last year.