

# Two fire districts vote to consolidate

In a precedent-setting move, the Soquel and Live Oak fire districts have voted to consolidate their districts into a single unit.

Directors met Tuesday night in Soquel and approved the move, although formal resolutions asking the county Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) to approve the merger won't be adopted by the boards until Sept. 7.

The two districts formed a joint powers authority two years ago and have been operating a consolidated fire department — the Central Santa Cruz County Fire Agency — for the last 18 months.

Fire Chief Harry Rowe said the experiment has been judged a success by the two boards.

If LAFCO approves the merger plan and the Board of Supervisors assures the two boards that a merged district will continue to receive its full share of property taxes and state bailout funds, the merger could be formalized by Jan. 1 and the new district operating by July 1 — the beginning of the next fiscal year.

Key to any merger, Rowe said, is the Board of Supervisors' willingness to allocate to the new district the bailout funds now paid to the Soquel and Live Oak boards.

Previous statements by the supervisors seemed to favor

consolidation, Rowe said. "We have no assurance yet from the Board of Supervisors, but we like to think this is what they are looking at. If they can't give these assurances, then it effectively kills any further consolidation efforts in the county."

This is the first attempt in Santa Cruz County to merge fire districts although there have been successful efforts in surrounding counties, including Monterey.

The two districts and the JPA now operate a department with 28 employees, 40 volunteers and a budget of \$1,616,566.

The new board, if the merger is finally approved, will tentatively be composed of the five joint powers authority board members — three from the Live Oak district and two from the Soquel district.

The districts have asked the county counsel if it is possible to set up zones or areas within the merged district so that the present three-two representation split between Live Oak and Soquel can be continued.

If that is not possible, then future elections will be held on an at-large basis, Rowe said.

All 10 board members from the two districts favor the merger, Rowe said, although a recent change in state law allows the merger to take place if only simple majorities of the two boards approve it.