

## LAFCO boss wants one big fire district

By BUD O'BRIEN

A recommendation that could lead to the formation of a single fire district to serve all of Santa Cruz County south of Aptos will be considered Wednesday by the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO).

The recommendation will come from Pat McCormick, LAFCO's executive officer. But McCormick, recognizing such a proposal will meet stern resistance from some of the individual fire districts that would be absorbed into one huge district, will also suggest some alternative proposals short of a complete merger of the districts for the commission to consider.

McCormick's recommendations will be considered as a part of LAFCO's consideration of (1) adopting "spheres of influence" for the separate fire districts in the South County, and (2) of requests by the Freedom and La Selva fire districts to annex certain areas into their districts.

McCormick will recommend that instead of adopting spheres of influence for each district, the commission adopt one sphere of influence for South County. This would have the effect of forcing individual districts either to consider merger or some sort of contractual arrangement with other areas, or to remain as they are.

While LAFCO has no authority over how autonomous districts operate, it has under state law the authority to establish the spheres of influence that indicate the areas districts can expand into, effectively giving the commission control over annexations.

Because he realizes that his proposal will meet at least ini-

tial strong opposition, McCormick will suggest to the commission Wednesday that it delay for a month any action on the proposed spheres of influence and annexations.

The annexation requests on the agenda include ones by the Freedom Fire District to annex a large area that takes in parts of Larkin Valley, and the Buena Vista area on the ocean side of the freeway, and by the La Selva district to take in portions of both those areas as well as other areas on both sides of the freeway.

McCormick will cite a study made by South County fire chiefs last year to support his contention that a single fire protection agency for the South County would be the most effective and most efficient way to provide fire protection for the entire area. He will also be armed with a letter from the Watsonville City Manager John Radin opposing adoption of individual spheres of influence for each existing district and supporting "a joint effort in providing effective and efficient fire protection for South County."

While that might not be an endorsement for a single fire protection agency, it is certainly a call for cooperative action among the fire districts, and McCormick will have some suggestions on how to go about obtaining such cooperation if merger proves to be too bitter a pill for the proudly autonomous districts to swallow.

McCormick will present the commission with three possible options to consider aside from merger. Each of those options calls for the closure of either the Freedom fire station or Watsonville fire station No. 2, which are scarcely half-a-mile apart.

McCormick will maintain that superior fire service could be offered at less cost by maintaining one station with four professional firefighters manning it around the clock. That

would increase the full-time manpower by one person, he said, with one less station.

One of McCormick's options also calls for building a new fire station in the East Lake Avenue-College Road vicinity, manned by two persons, a venture already being considered by both the Salsipuedes Fire District and the city of Watsonville.

In all of his options, McCormick pointed out, the volunteer forces that constitute the heart of the Freedom and Salsipuedes firefighting capability would be maintained.

For any of the options to be workable, some sort of contractual arrangement would have to be made among the affected districts. McCormick said this could be done without taking away the autonomy of the districts, which would retain their individual boards of directors, etc.

LAFCO will be considering these controversial proposals beginning at 9:30 a.m. Wednesday in the Board of Supervisors chambers on the fifth floor of the County Governmental Center in Santa Cruz.