

Four fire departments told they should merge

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APTOS — Four local fire departments should consolidate into a single agency, according to a Sacramento consulting firm.

A merger of the Aptos/La Selva, Branciforte, Central and Scotts Valley fire departments would enhance the level of services in the region, according to a report by Ralph Anderson & Associates.

Representatives of the firm presented their findings Monday night to the four departments.

"Consolidations are not new," said Bob Wall, project consultant. "They are more or less a trend in California."

The move, however, remains dif-

ficult, he said.

The consulting firm, which was hired by the fire departments, has prepared a blueprint for the agencies to consider.

In its proposal, the firm proposes several major — and controversial — changes for the fire departments.

The firm recommends that the districts look at eliminating full-time firefighters at La Selva Beach and Soquel stations.

Instead of full-time firefighters, they would operate with volunteers.

The move likely would result in slower response times for fire calls in the area, depending on the location, said Aptos/La Selva Chief

Chuck Mornard.

Along with volunteers in La Selva Beach, firefighters from the Rio del Mar station would respond, he said.

Paramedic service would not be affected because the paramedics respond from Rio del Mar, according to Mornard.

At the same time, staffing would increase to two firefighters at the Branciforte station.

Several department directors questioned the move, saying they thought it would significantly reduce fire protection and medical services in the region.

"I don't see the quantitative and qualitative measure that I can evaluate," said Raymond Garcia, a

director with Aptos/La Selva. "I want something to say this is logical."

Ron Pederson, a director with Central district, agreed.

"How do you justify it?" he asked.

According to the consultants, a merger could cut the staff of the four districts by 11 employees, mostly administrators.

The move could save as much as \$600,000, said Joseph P. Hinsberg, vice president of the consulting firm.

Wall said the overall service in the region would be the same because the departments would be coordinating their personnel and equipment.

The report findings are a starting point for the districts to review, and can be modified, officials said.

The consultants were asked to prepare a report that "builds an organization from the ground up," Hinsberg said.

The idea of a consolidation came up more than a year ago.

It was prompted by suspicions that state legislators will push for mass consolidation of special districts, like fire districts, to save money.

A study by the fire departments last year also determined that a merger is possible.

"There are huge issues," Hinsberg said. "... There are personal,

political decisions you are going to have to make."

In the next week, the consultants will prepare an appendix to their report, answering the questions posed by fire officials Monday.

The fire boards then will have to decide on consolidation.

"You're asking us to get married," said William Simpkins, Central Fire director, describing the major step.

He asked the consultants to prepare a report on each district's debt, its equipment value and what each station is worth.

"Who are we getting married to here?" he asked.