

# Fire districts study merger proposal

By BOB SMITH

Aptos fire directors last week approved a study with the La Selva Beach Fire District that could eventually lead to consolidation of the two departments or some other type of joint operation such as a joint powers authority.

The fire directors also backed away from its plans to annex the Ranchitos del Sol-Cox Road area of Day Valley until after the California Department of Forestry completes its master fire plan for the county.

The board placed a three months hold on the annexation, and will consider it again in March.

The Aptos fire directors unanimously authorized Fire Chief Al Forbes to meet with his counterpart in La Selva Beach, Al Kinslow, "to study with La Selva Beach the consolidation of some of our services."

The action came after Roy

Johnston, chairman of the La Selva Beach district, told the Aptos directors that he and the other La Selva directors had no interest in becoming part of a single South County Fire Department, as proposed by Pat McCormick, executive officer of the county's Local Agency Formation Commission.

McCormick suggested to LAFCO last week that LAFCO should encourage the consolidation of the Watsonville, Freedom, La Selva Beach and Salsipuedes fire districts into a single fire department. The first step and the only one that LAFCO can take without support from the separate fire districts, McCormick said last week, would be to establish a single sphere of influence for south county fire district — the area that a fire district or city believes to be its ultimate expansion area — instead of approving new, separate spheres for Freedom and Salsipuedes, and annexations into the Larkin Valley area for La Selva Beach and Freedom.

LAFCO can block annexations proposed by the fire districts, but, according to McCormick, it doesn't have the power to order districts to consolidate; nor, on the other hand, can it block a consolidation.

The county Board of Supervisors, however, could force the independent districts to seri-

ously consider merger by withholding part or all of the state augmentation money that now constitutes about half of each fire district's annual budgets. That money is sent to the supervisors who have sole control over how the money is apportioned among the various special districts in the county, including the fire protection districts.

Aptos has already told LAFCO commissioners that they want no part of any South County fire consolidation, and believes it should be considered part of the Midcounty.

"It doesn't affect us," Forbes said Tuesday night. "There seems to be a feeling that Aptos is more related to the Central County and Capitola fire districts."

McCormick's recommendations last week reflected the Aptos position — his recom-

mended sphere of influence for the South County extended from the limits of the Aptos sphere south to the Pajaro River and encompassed the city of Watsonville, Freedom, Salsipuedes and La Selva Beach as well as the unincorporated areas of the county now protected by the California Department of Forestry under a contract with the county Board of Supervisors.

If consolidation does occur, Forbes sees the city of Watsonville dominating the South County.

"I get the feeling," he told the board, "that Watsonville will be the South County fire department. When the smoke clears, you will see the Watsonville flag rising.

Johnston said La Selva feels a closer kinship to Aptos than to any of the South County districts, even through the department has mutual aid agreements with all of them.

"There won't be any annexations for the six months," Johnston predicted. "No one will agree to these spheres of influence. If people in the county (government building) want to make it one fire district all the way to the Pajaro River, fine. I want no part of it," he added.

"Do we want to make a study

to see where we are?" he asked the Aptos board.

"If the study doesn't work out, we file it," Johnston added.

The idea struck a responsive chord with Aptos fire board chairman Richard Duchscher. "We should do something before you get under the gun," he told Johnston.

"In the past, I have been very reluctant to spend any more of the chief's (Al Forbes) time on

another study," Duchscher said. "But I don't disagree with having some chalk talks."

The pressure is growing in the county, Duchscher said, to consolidate fire districts, as Live Oak and Soquel did to form the Central County Fire Protection District.

"Capitola is under pressure to go with Central," Duchscher said, "and Freedom with Watsonville."