

LO, Soquel Fire Units Consolidate

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It's been discussed for 10 years, planned seriously for the last five years, and on Jan. 2, combining of the firefighting forces of Live Oak and Soquel districts will become a reality.

The districts will retain their identities, but for all practical firefighting purposes, they will become one under a state-enabling joint powers agreement that establishes a board of directors made up of the two district's commissioners.

Chief Harry W. Rowe of the Live Oak District will become the head firefighter and he will have assistant chiefs at each

district: Doug Schmidt at Live Oak and Steven Negro at Soquel.

The JPA, known as the Central Santa Cruz County Fire Protection Agency, will be chaired by Bill Reddehase of the Live Oak Commission and also seat commissioners Ronald Pederson and Mel Foster of Live Oak and Ken Izant and John Wessell of the Soquel Commission.

At a press conference this morning, Reddehase said combining the forces is a step to full consolidation of the districts and agreed it appears "the trend of the future."

Together the districts serve a 20 square mile area with a population of between 30,000 to 35,000. Live Oak has the greater

number of residents to serve, but the Soquel District has the greater land area.

It will give each district three firehouses to call on and 25 paid firemen, three chiefs and two clerical workers, as well as more than 40 volunteers.

Negro said the JPA merger was spurred along by Proposition 13 that cut property tax revenues and seriously hurt paid and volunteer fire departments. But, he said it was the retirement of both districts' chiefs the past year "that brought it to a head."

Chiefs Ray Negro retired from Soquel and Richard Pound from Live Oak.

The new commissioners and chiefs this morning said the JPA would make it

possible to give the residents of the central county better service for the same amount of money and that without such a move, firefighting service would have degraded because of the limited revenues.

Negro said, "You have to either go backward or forward in this business; this move makes it possible to go forward."

Reddehase said that on Jan. 2 "the two fire districts will be operating as a single agency providing all services relating to fire protection for the two communities."

He said he looked down the road to a time when the districts will be fully consolidated and that a new super-district

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"had the full participation of Capitola fire district."

"This action has been taken to eliminate duplication of administrative expenses formerly borne by the two districts," Reddehase said. "Other advantages include response of the nearest engine company regardless of district boundaries and sharing of assets such as hose, fire apparatus and reducing maintenance."

It also will mean that wages and training will be standardized for both districts.

The JPA contract is for two years to see how it works out. The choices then will be to continue the JPA, totally merge the districts into a central county firefighting force, or to revert to two districts.

While the members of the JPA, which will make a number of the administrative decisions, are appointed by the elected boards, it was pointed out by the commissioners and chiefs this morning that the public elects the commissioners in the first place.

"It means that the members of the joint powers agreement are, in fact, elected by the public," Reddehase said.

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