

Consolidation still far away

The Capitola and Live Oak fire directors are still mulling over the idea of either consolidating the districts or possibly contracting with each other to handle areas now split between the fire districts—Sutter Hill in particular.

But Soquel—which is in an enviable position financially—has dealt itself out of any discussions to consolidate into a midcounty district.

Directors from the three districts met Monday night at the Live Oak fire department. Attending were Robert Cook and

Richard Mendonca of Capitola; Marion Hobbs and John Wessell and Fire Chief Ray Negro of Soquel; and the full live Oak board—Bill Reddehase, Roy Anderson, Bill Castro, Ray Lund and Brad Walsh—and Live Oak Fire Chief Dick Pound.

The issue was first raised after Live Oak petitioned the county Local Agency Formation Commission a year ago for permission to detach a piece of the Brown Bulb Ranch, now in the Capitola fire district and slated for development as the Sutter Hill shopping center, and annex it to

Live Oak.

On the advice of its executive director, Ed Hanna, the commission rejected the request, and then turned around and told the districts to either consolidate or come back with a plan to straighten out the jigsaw puzzle-like boundaries between Capitola, Live Oak and, in some cases, Soquel.

Live Oak benefited from the take-over attempt, however. Sensitive to district's shrinking land area as Capitola pursues annexations into east Live Oak, the commission told Capitola that it couldn't petition for the automatic detachment of Sutter Hill-Sears from Live Oak and its addition to the Capitola fire district. State annexation law allows a city within one year to take such action by simply passing a reso-

lution. LAFCO's action will require the Capitola city council or the Capitola fire district to file a regular application with LAFCO—a move that Live Oak can contest.

The fire districts ignored the LAFCO order for presenting the plan, but have sporadically continued to meet on the possibility.

Soquel spokesmen said they were not interested in consolidation at this time because it is a volunteer fire district and the costs of becoming a paid department would be too great under consolidation.

Soquel currently has a tax rate of 47 cents with two paid chief officers—Ray and Ernie Negro—and 35 volunteers. Soquel believes it would need at least eight men to maintain a paid staff, which would roughly double its tax rate.

Advantages noted by both Live Oak and Capitola for consolidation are a reduction in administrative costs and a reduction in the need for reserve (standby) fire pumpers.

Live Oak Asst. Chief Harry Rowe said the districts are now required by the insurance industry to have one reserve engine for every eight engines, and two reserve pumpers if there are more than eight engines. Both districts now have more reserve pumpers than they would need under consolidation.

Capitola has some special troubles. Mendonca pointed out that because of SB-90 and the aftermath of the CETA program, the district has hired three former CETA-paid firemen, and has pulled back on its plans for another station at Jade Street and 41st Avenue.

And because it won't be able to house an extra pumper in old city garage next to city hall much longer, it is also making plans for building a storage facility for some of its equipment.

Hanna said recently that consolidation would allow the combined districts to tax at the highest rate permitted in the old districts. Capitola has been limited by SB-90 to 79.6 cents while Live Oak can levy a tax rate in excess of \$1.08 per \$100 assessed valuation—a rate that could support an expanded fire service in the Capitola area.

Directors will return to their boards to discuss the idea of consolidation or contractualization, and also put together a "check sheet" of finances, equipment, present inventory and needs.

If the boards approve, committees will be formed with one member, the chairmen of the two boards, and the chiefs, to discuss the benefits of contractualization and consolidation to both districts.

A tentative date for another general meeting was set for May 17.

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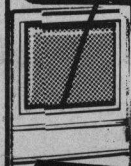
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