

Fire damages at least 20 homes in Wilsonville

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By Corey Buchanan

Driving from her home in Canby to Wilsonville in the middle of the night, Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue Public Affairs Chief Cassandra Ulven could see an orange glow emanating from the other side of the river. Immediately, she knew the fire she was traveling toward was bigger than the average blaze.

The fire began at a three-story apartment complex under construction, causing extensive damage in the Villebois neighborhood Sunday, March 31.

The fire was reported just after 1 a.m. at the 11000 block of S.W. Collina Lane in Wilsonville, and quickly spread to other homes in the neighborhood — eventually damaging or destroying at least 20 occupied condominiums. In addition, the fire destroyed approximately 14 vehicles and displaced 25 people, according to Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue. No injuries were reported.

“From the police side we’re grateful that, as far as we know now, no one was hurt or killed. It obviously did an enormous amount of financial damage to a lot of folks,” Wilsonville Police Chief Rob Wurpes said.

Also, less extensive damage such as blown out windows and siding damage occurred at many more homes.

Ulven said the fire spread to other buildings soon after it first ignited.

“There were a lot of phone calls to 911 between 1 a.m. and 1:15 a.m. and people were reporting very early on that the fire was spreading to their home. By the time it was detected it was already growing so quickly and so large that the exposed buildings were at risk,” Ulven said.

TVF&R, the Lake Oswego Fire Department, Portland Fire & Rescue and Canby and Aurora fire districts worked into the night to control the fire, extinguish the fire in occupied buildings and evacuate residents. Officials determined the fire to be under control by 4 a.m. TVF&R and other agencies stayed on the scene throughout the morning to cool burn piles and hot spots at adjacent homes that could rekindle.

“It was very big and we had a lot of occupied homes nearby. In Villebois there are quite a few nice homes located close together. Just protecting those structures and keeping it from becoming a bigger problem was an issue,” Ulven said.

Ulven said that because sprinkler systems are required throughout the community, Villebois is more protected in case of a fire than most communities. However, the sprinkler system infrastructure at the complex being constructed by Polygon Homes had yet to be implemented.

“We have had very few fires in that community. Typically if you do have a fire in a home with a residential sprinkler system, it stays very small and confined to the room of origin,” Ulven said. “Unfortunately this was an unusual situation where the building was under construction and surrounded by occupied buildings.”

As for the occupied homes, Ulven said the activated sprinkler systems there are designed to mitigate a fire coming from within a home rather than from the outside and couldn't hinder the approaching blaze.

Ulven said a local community member offered to open up the Wilsonville Community Center for displaced residents to stay and the American Red Cross assisted those people that night. However, many displaced people stayed with friends or family members that night and some were able to return home the next morning, according to Ulven.

"There was also an incredible amount of generosity between neighbors that night," Ulven said.

Wurpes said the police department as well as officials from TVF&R and the Oregon State Police were investigating the cause of the fire but were waiting for the site to cool down before examining it. They will use witness interviews, video surveillance and footage to do so. To provide a tip, call 503-723-4949. The police department also have deputies assigned to the area 24/7 and have increased patrols there.

"It may be a few days before investigators can really get their hands dirty in that scene and figure out what the cause may be," Wurpes said the morning after the fire. "As we speak it's too hot to get close to it."

Wilsonville City Councilor Ben West was working when the fire started but said he drove to the site on his way home.

"You could see neighbors gathering around. They were just somber and quiet and shocked," he said. "It was uncanny. It was devastating. You hate to see that happen in any community, especially somewhere so close to home."

West started a GoFundMe account for the people affected by the fire. To donate to the fundraiser, visit www.gofundme.com/villebois-fire-relief-fund. He also said the fire would be a topic of conversation at the Wilsonville City Council meeting Monday, April 1.

"Is there something we can do as leadership to prevent this tragedy from happening again? I think we need to look at this with a critical eye," West said.

Ulven also said the fire department might schedule a community meeting to update the community on the investigation and to discuss fire safety precautions.