

Downtown businesses destroyed, Scottsburg Jamboree damaged in probable explosion

Written by George Browning
Friday, 28 December 2012 00:00 -

Investigators hoped to be able to enter what is left of a dental office on the south side of the Scottsburg downtown square on Friday morning, December 28, after the office and a finance center next to it were destroyed in what some are calling a possible explosion.

Scottsburg Fire Chief James Richey stated that no one was around to hear or see what happened around 1 a.m. on December 27.

What he and other investigators do know is that, some time before 1 a.m., the security company whose alarm system Dr. Joyce Coates used in her dental office contacted the 9-1-1 Center to advise a motion sensor had been set off in the building. Dispatchers sent Scottsburg police officers to the building.

Those officers discovered debris on Wardell Street in front of the building. At first, it was thought that someone may have driven a vehicle into the structure. Then, as officers observed flames in the rear, dispatchers were again contacted by the security company, which reported a fire alarm had been activated.

Chief Richey was first firefighter on the scene. "When I got there, the whole store front (of the dental office) was laying in the street. We had heavy black smoke coming from both floors, and I could see flames coming out of the second story," he related.

Chief Richey requested the alarm be set off again for the Scottsburg department, and he requested volunteers bring both of the department's ladder trucks to the scene. "They brought nearly everything we had," he noted.

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Then, the fire chief had dispatchers call Vienna, Jennings Township (Austin) and Monroe Township (Underwood). "I realized what we were facing, and it sure didn't look good. We needed ladder trucks so we could get above the flames and shoot water down into the building," he explained.

The Austin men complied, so the companies' three trucks were situated fore and aft, with the third truck in the nearby public library's parking lot. A constant stream of a whole lot of water began pouring into the brick structure.

The fire chief and volunteers were extremely concerned that flames could spread into the adjoining, historic, old Scott Theater, now known as the Scottsburg Jamboree. "That building is a story-and-a-half, and it's connected in the middle to the dental office. We just had to hope that our fire-fighting strategy was going to work," he said.

While city workers from several departments gathered to aid in any way they could, some 100 firefighters were on the scene at the fire's peak. "Great back-up, great support. It was a team effort," advised Chief Richey.

Three hours of hard, determined effort later, the fire was brought under control. It had been contained to the one building, but the dental office and another business, One Main Financial, were heavily damaged as was a refurbished apartment over the financial center. The apartment is owned by Sandee and Mike Owens of Scottsburg.

The Scottsburg Jamboree had water standing in its aisles and nearly everywhere else. But at dawn's light, firemen knew their efforts had worked. Both buildings still stood.

"It was one heck of a 'save,' " said Chief Richey.

The local fire department was finally able to leave the site around 2 p.m. on that Thursday.

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Chief Richey headed home for a shower and some sleep. On Friday morning, December 28, he and officials from the Indiana State Fire Marshal's Office as well as investigators from the four insurance companies involved and a stray ATF officer or two planned to go into the damaged building. They were going to learn what caused the fire.

But first, Chief Richey said, a structural engineer was going to look at the building and determine if it was safe enough to enter.

"All of the fire was in the back of the building. The front portion got the heavy water and smoke damage. What the engineer has to determine is if the building will continue to be structurally sound," he explained.

Additionally, since most of the fire was in the back, there are items that could be salvaged from the building. "But we just need to make sure everyone is going to be safe," Richey said.

No one was injured in the fire. A couple of firemen slipped and fell on ice during the clean-up stage of the operation, it was learned, but they did not require immediate medical attention.

"We had people on hand who brought us drinks and food. Scott County EMS was here as were the city police and Sheriff's Department. We had a lot of support, which made the job, well, a little easier, if fighting a fire this time of year can be described as easy," the fire chief related.

The amount of property damage will be determined later.