



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

A Santa Cruz City firefighter helps clean up a mess left at Santa Cruz City Hall where an alleged arsonist set fire to a wing of the downtown building. The early-morning fire charred the human resources department.

Arson suspected at Santa Cruz City Hall

State Park headquarters also targeted

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Two suspicious early-morning blazes that ripped through Santa Cruz City Hall and a California State Park headquarters Monday

have fire investigators calling foul play as it appears the fires were started intentionally within 20 minutes of each other.

Santa Cruz City firefighters responded to a structure fire at 809

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ARSON

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Center St. in Santa Cruz at the City Hall building at approximately 2:15 a.m. On arrival, they encountered heavy smoke and there was fire showing from the south wing of the building complex which houses the City Human Resources Department.

There was considerable fire and heat damage to the building and contents, though the structural damage was not thought to be critical enough to close the building permanently, according to Santa Cruz Fire Department Deputy Chief Matt Tracy.

"At this point it appears that this is going to be a major nuisance only," said Tracy. "We have got the place cleared out and, at first look, the structural damage does not look severe and there were a lot of fire proof file cabinets which survived the blaze."

The fireproof cabinets saved some invaluable information on some 800 city employees. Firefighters spent a good part of Tuesday hauling charred furniture, carpets and other furnishings out of the burned offices. Curious and bewildered onlookers stopped by the yellow, taped-off crime scene to watch the commotion throughout the day.

"I got a call before I came to work this morning and I was shocked; I still don't believe it," said Carri Williams, who has worked in the City Hall personnel department for the past four years. She said about eight people work in the damaged wing of the building.

"We've already met a few times today to come up with a plan on how to continue our work. It's re-

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— Richard Wilson

Santa Cruz City Manager

ally sad," Williams said.

Smoke also entered the City Council Chambers, but no structural damage was reported.

The Scotts Valley Fire Department, along with the Santa Cruz Police Department, assisted the City Fire Department. A total of 19 firefighters with four engines, one truck and one battalion chief battled the blaze and were able to contain and control it within 25 minutes.

The preliminary estimated loss was \$400,000, accounting for contents lost and structural damage. There were no reports of injuries and investigators are continuing to investigate the exact cause of the fire. Officials expected the initial damage estimate to go up.

About 20 minutes after the fire was reported at City Hall, a second fire broke out at the California State Parks Headquarters at 600 Ocean St., across from the county buildings.

"We think that someone tried to set the building on fire, but the sprinkler system worked properly and kept the damage to a minimum," said Dave Vincent, district superintendent for California State Parks.

"There was water damage on one wall and part of a ceiling, but no visible structural damage evident."

The fire originated near a utility closet as a bottle filled with a flammable liquid was placed in a vent. But it was extinguished by the sprinkler system before firefighters arrived, according to Vincent. There was no immediate estimate on damage costs.

Richard Wilson, who is in his 22nd year as city manager in Santa Cruz, said he was deeply saddened by the fire. "It's pretty grim," he said. "We've had vandalism and extensive damage at City Hall before, but not of this scale."

The City Hall fire blackened about 1,500 square feet of office space in the 1930s-era building. The single-story, adobe-style building surrounds a manicured garden that features a fountain as its centerpiece. The City Council Chambers stand next to the burned portion of the complex.

In 1997 vandals broke into City Hall and tossed computers on the floor, discharged fire extinguishers around the rooms and soaked the carpets with water. In 2001, the same building sustained major damage when vandals ran lengths of hose into the building and left water running from the outdoor spigots throughout the night.

A similar water and hose attack was also staged at the State Parks district office in 2001, running up about \$250,000 in damage to walls, carpeting and other materials. No one was charged in any of those events.

If anyone has any information concerning this incident, they are asked to call Detective Tony Parker of the Santa Cruz Police Department at 420-5839.