

Timing of Herbst gas station fire raises suspicions

By DAN WHITE
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APTOS — Firefighters want anyone with clues about the Terrible Herbst gas station fire to step forward immediately. The vacant gas station, a prominent Aptos Village eyesore, partially burned Thursday night.

"We just know it was intentional," said Aptos/La Selva fire marshal Paul Vitali.

Vitali said most of the structure escaped damage. "But the wood (on the roof) is charred, so the building's probably unusable now," he said. "No business could move into it."

No suspect has been named, but many area merchants, and diners in Aptos Village restaurants, saw the flames bursting out. Firefighters ruled out any spontaneous fuel combustion because the fuel tanks have long been removed from the property.

Many merchants have criticized the building and its condition. But Vitali said the site is in better shape than it's been in years. "There used to be big piles of mud when they removed the tanks but they leveled it out," he said. "And they kept the weeds down."

Bayview staff phoned the fire in

to the Aptos/La Selva Beach fire department, which arrived at the scene and put out the flames around 9:30 p.m.

Vitali reported the incident to owner Jerry Herbst of Las Vegas, who did not return a Sentinel phone call about the fire. Herbst owns a string of gas stations.

The Herbst property, with a reported selling price of \$700,000, has been vacant since the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. It was the subject of a Sentinel article that was published the morning before the fire broke out.

"The timing with the article and the fire was discussed," said Aptos/La Selva fire Capt. Mike Conrad.

"Whether this is a fluke thing, it is hard to say," Conrad said. "We may never know unless we find the person or persons responsible. Maybe someone read the article and said, 'let's do something about it.'"

"We all want something to be done with the property but to go to that extreme is a little bizarre," said Jeanie Lagerwerff, owner of the Bayview.

Conrad said witnesses should contact him at 685-6690.