

City surveys fire damage

Feds offer help in City Hall arson

By DAN WHITE

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Eight city employees picked through their charred offices on Wednesday, with Human Resources Director Erwin Young holding his nose as he held up a family photo, black with soot.

It was the first time the employees were allowed to visit the Center Street offices since an arsonist hit around 2 a.m. Tuesday, scorching one wing of the City Hall complex.

Someone also tried to burn the local State Parks office on Ocean Street, placing a gas-filled bottle in a vent, but a sprin-

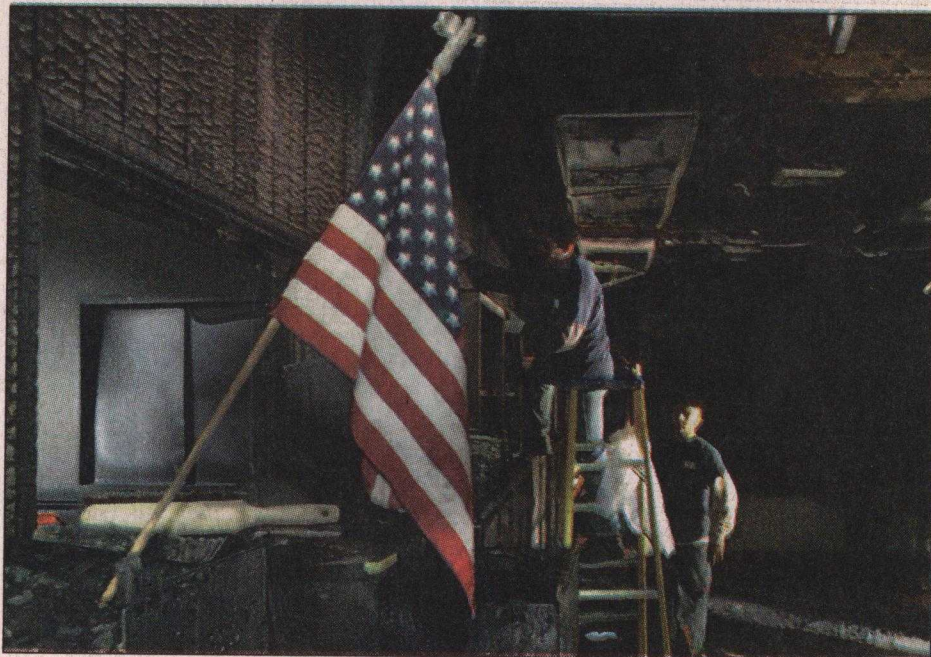
kler system doused the flames.

Fireproof cabinets protected most of the files at City Hall, and the city is insured for the roughly \$400,000 in damages. But displaced workers had to move Wednesday. By next week they will be working out of a double-wide trailer

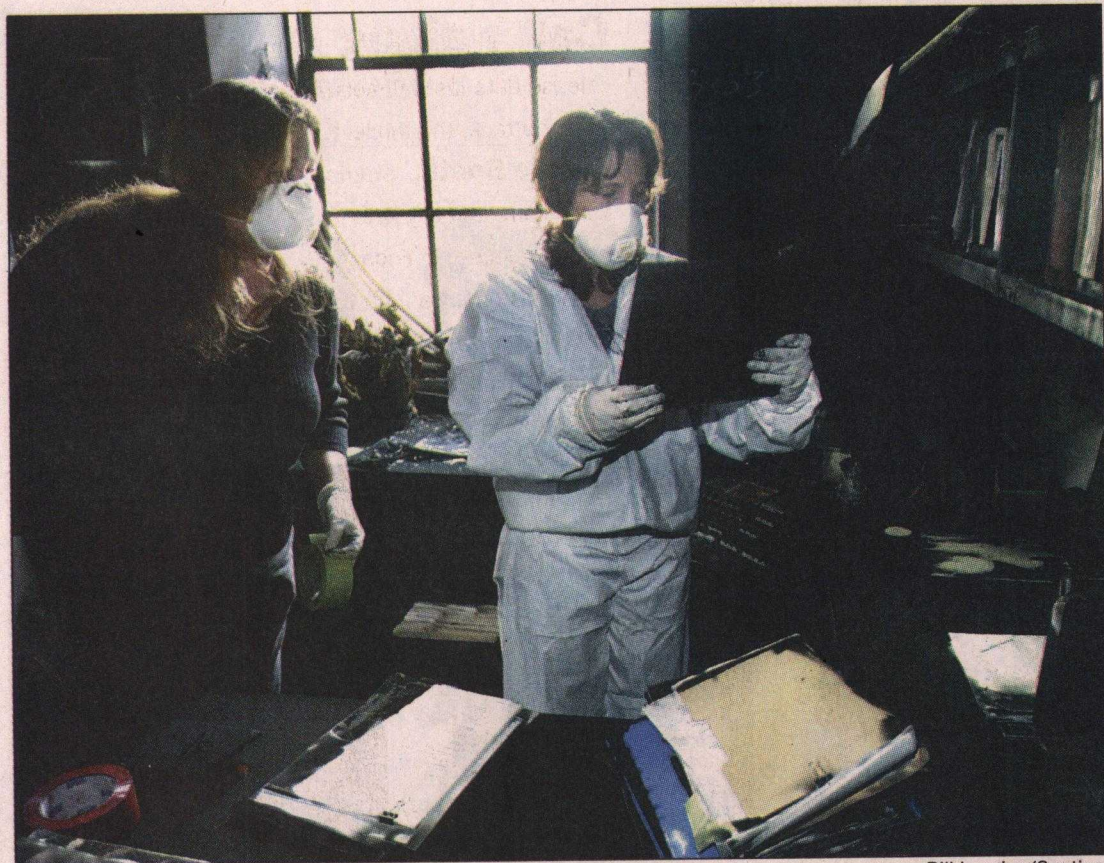
See **FIRE** on **BACK PAGE**

Workers go through cleanup operations on Wednesday following the Tuesday morning fire in Santa Cruz City Hall.

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel



A-12 SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL Thursday, April 3, 2003



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Kelly Menehan and Maria Schwartz look at some personal items on Wednesday, damaged early Tuesday morning in the fire in their office in Santa Cruz City Hall.

Fire: Repairs estimated to take six months

Continued from Page A1

parked across the street.

The workers were relieved to see the fireproof cabinets lived up to their names. Someone, in a gesture of solidarity, set up an American flag amid the destruction.

Finance Director Dave Culver popped his head in.

"Oh my God," he said.

Young gave a tour of his blackened office. The air was acrid, and he held his nose as he pointed to some soot-covered family photos and broken windows. It looked as if someone had spray painted the complex black from floor to ceiling.

"All my stuff," Young said. "All these melted light fixtures."

Most employees seemed to have a stoic attitude.

Everyone was quick to point out that no one was hurt, that everything lost or damaged was replaceable, and that the building was insured.

But the idea of someone lashing out at the city with such an attack still frightened the employees, who were in the middle of a big project, implementing a new personnel and payroll system.

"It's like a bad movie," said human resources assistant Angela Casalegno.

"I kept thinking, 'It can't be. We were just working there on Monday.' Who would think you come in next day and everything is just gone?"

"I don't think they realized how many people they touched," Casalegno said. "On a personal level, it's just thinking about all the work I've got to do just to get back to where I was (before the fire.)"

"Anger is a part of it," added

Kelly Menehan, assistant human resources director. "But we don't know who did it so there's no one to way to direct it. I don't think it's personal against our department. My sense is it's an act against government, or else it's just somebody who is a lunatic."

But "government," she said, is made up of hard-working people.

"When you work in the public sector you are part of government," she said. "You are the ones who make government run, that do the daily work. And we are people just like anybody else, doing a job."

It will take an estimated six months to repair the office. In the meantime, the Human Resources Department will set up shop in Room 7 at 809 Center St. Job applicants and members of the public can contact staff there, or call 420-5040.

The federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, meanwhile, stepped in Wednesday to examine evidence at both arson sites.

The fact a state agency was hit, and that there were past incidents at City Hall, drew the agency's attention.

This is the first time the ATF has stepped in to help with a Santa Cruz case since 1996, when a bomb blast nearly killed attorney Jack Jacobson in his Eastside office. Jacobson recovered. That case remains unsolved.

Santa Cruz Deputy Fire Marshal Ray Zachau said the federal agency isn't throwing its weight around. Agents have offered help in examining possible fingerprints and evidence fibers. The city accepted.

Most of the investigation will be handled locally. Zachau said the city has lined up a list of people

for questioning, but he stopped short of calling them suspects. He said the city is looking at people with a past record of large and small arson cases.

"There can be a compulsive aspect, he said. "There are a lot of psychological reasons for burning things, (but) this one tends to lend itself to the mad-at-the-government type, and those types of suspects tend to be repeat offenders."

In contrast, he said, revenge arsonists, such as someone angry at an ex-lover, tend to strike just once.

He would not say how the city arrived at the list of people to question.

While witnesses have not come forward, Zachau said the city is following up on several tips. Some appear to have merit "and some turned out to be sort of crackpot," he said.

Asked if investigators would pay special attention to people who have ranted against city government, he said that's unlikely.

"We can't question the whole city."

He put the chances of solving the case at better than 50 percent.

"One of the big fallacies is fire destroys evidence," he said. "We have actual samples of what was used."

He said the fire department knows how the arsonist started the City Hall fire, but would not go into detail, saying revealing too much could compromise the investigation.

State fire investigators are handling the arson at the parks office. They did not return calls to their San Mateo office on Wednesday.

Contact Dan White at dwhite@santa-cruz.com.