

Arsonist strikes



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

ABOVE: Rich Kleinheinz, battalion chief of the Santa Cruz Fire Department, leaves the scene of Tuesday morning's fire at City Hall.

Santa Cruz City Hall, State Parks office both targeted

By **CATHY REDFERN**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Some city workers are setting up temporary quarters today while police pull old vandalism files after an arsonist torched City Hall and the local State Parks headquarters early Tuesday.

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The first fire ignited around 2:15 a.m. at City Hall, where an arsonist or arsonists struck the only portion of the historic building without a sprinkler system, the wing that survived the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake relatively unscathed.

The flames gutted the 1,500-square-foot human resources wing, causing an estimated \$400,000 in damage, most of

which will be covered by insurance.

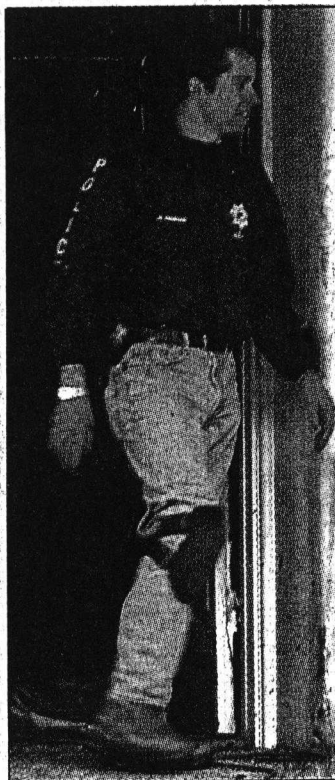
Much of the damage was to interior walls, Deputy Fire Marshal Ray Zachau said.

"It was a heck of a save," he said.

The eight human resources employees will work out of a trailer on Center Street for the next six months or so.

Luckily, fire-proof file cabinets saved the personnel records of some 800 city employees, Human Resources Director Erwin Young said.

"For the most part, it looks like we'll be OK," he said.



Santa Cruz Police officer Tony Parker leaves one of the burned offices at City Hall during an investigation Tuesday into the fire that gutted the space.

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Latest attack nothing new at government headquarters

By **DAN WHITE**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Serious vandalism to government buildings is rare in California, yet the Tuesday morning torching of Santa Cruz City Hall has a familiar ring.

There have been two vandalisms at City Hall in recent history.

The building was vandalized in July 1997, then again by hose-wielding vandals in June 2001. That was part of an unsolved crime spree that included the overnight soakings of the local State Parks office, two law offices, and an insurance office.

In the 1997 incident, someone broke into the city manager's office, which currently houses the personnel department. It's the same area of City Hall that was set on fire Tuesday morning.

In that 1997 attack, someone soaked carpets, tossed computers on the floor and sprayed the walls, desks and copying machine with a fire extinguisher. The culprit gained access by throwing a brick through a window. Broken pipes, and a deliberately plugged-up toilet, caused the flooding.

Latest act of vandalism won't cripple city financially

SENTINEL STAFF REPORT

SANTA CRUZ — City Manager Dick Wilson was among the first on the scene early Tuesday after someone set a section of City Hall on fire.

It was a grim scene, but Wilson said he was heartened by the fact the fire — damage was estimated at \$400,000 — apparently won't further cripple a city already \$1.8 million in the red.

Wilson said the city is part of an insurance pool that includes a number of other California governments, and that the fire repair would be paid for with insurance money. He cautioned, however, that "first guess" damages are almost always lower than the actual amount. He estimated it would take about six months to rebuild the damaged portion.

He said the fire-damaged section of City Hall survived the 1989 Loma Prieta quake almost intact. Luckily, the section damaged in the quake and later remodeled was untouched by the fire.

While the city's insurance policy covers the damage, the city will have out-of-pocket expenses.

Wilson said the city would likely step up police patrols in the area and may consider a private security firm.

Tuesday's fire was not the first vandalism of city offices. A number of city offices were damaged in 2001 after a vandal placed a running hose into the city buildings, leaving the water running throughout the night.

The state Parks Department office on Ocean Street, also set ablaze Tuesday night, also was targeted in the 2001 hose attacks.

Wilson did not have an estimate of what the extra patrols or private security would cost.

He said the primary impact is not financial.

"It's inconvenience, the loss of documents, the need to reconstruct things, and for makeshift offices," he said.

Luckily, he said, there are backup versions of many of the files lost in the fire.

Arsons

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Human resources services will be available this week at the adjacent benefits office in Room 7 of City Hall, he said.

Shortly after the City Hall fire, another alarm rang out at the Ocean Street parks department.

The leased building there sustained minimal damage when a plastic bottle filled with gasoline was placed in a vent adjacent to a sprinkler, which quickly doused the flames.

The 18-person office was closed Tuesday but will be open today.

Tuesday, workers already bracing for a budget-induced move to trailers at Henry Cowell State Park spent the day mopping up water-soaked carpeting in four rooms and a hallway.

"Morale is pretty much at rock-bottom," District Superintendent Dave Vincent said.

The cause of the City Hall fire was kept under wraps. But officials said firefighters arriving from less than a block away saw flames shooting out the windows and doors when they arrived.

"It was really going," Battalion Chief Bill Starrs said, adding that the flames were controlled within 25 minutes.

Police are considering links to a series of unsolved and damaging floodings in summer 2001.

"Both places were victimized in the past in a similar manner," Lt. Joe Haebe said. "But who knows? Nobody is taking credit. We have a number of suspects. It's just so uncalled for."

Detective Tony Parker said a witness saw a man on a bike in the area, but it's unclear if he was at the crime scene.

Police are asking anyone in the downtown area who may have surveillance camera footage from Tuesday morning to call them at 420-5820 or 420-5839.

City officials fielded questions and even got a few hugs Tuesday from citizens gazing past yellow crime tape into the blackened offices.

City Councilman Tim Fitzmaurice said a maintenance worker, firefighter or other city employee could have been hurt in the fire.

"I can't imagine that anyone who values this community, even if they are

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TIM FITZMAURICE,
SANTA CRUZ CITY COUNCIL

opposed to any of our policies, could think this is a reasonable way to express their opposition," he said.

"I assume these kinds of things have deep psychological sources. Nobody sent or signed a message. The only message is that there is a criminal on the loose."

Mayor Emily Reilly spoke of compassion but said she is viewing the arson as a serious criminal act.

"It's our job to protect city employees and city services, and this threatens that safety," she said. "It's confusing and demoralizing."

City Hall was built in 1938. Quake-damaged portions were remodeled and outfitted with sprinklers in 2001, but the human resources wing did not need a structural remodel and so the city was not required to outfit it with sprinklers.

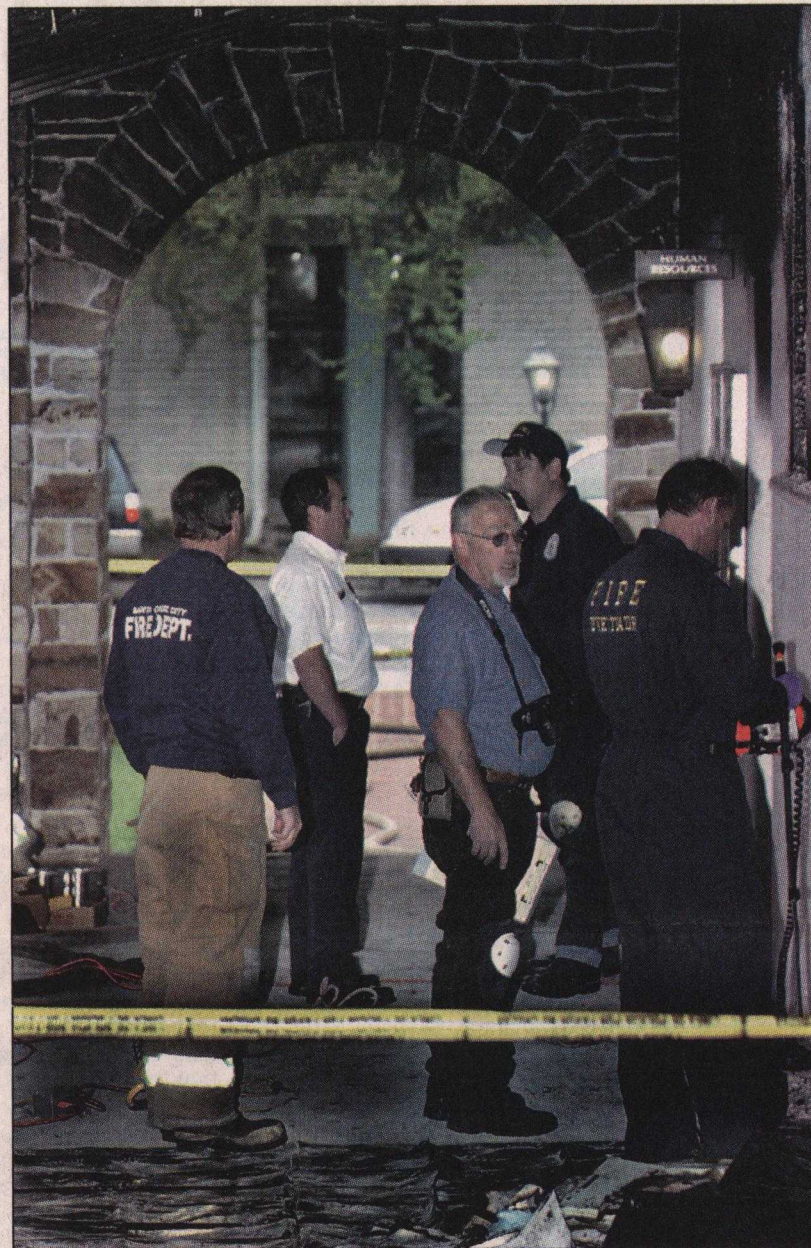
It would have cost an estimated \$80,000 to \$100,000 to add sprinklers to that wing, city officials said, adding that they will consider doing so.

"It is such a beautiful building," Fitzmaurice said. "We have taken so much care to avoid making changes to destroy its character. To see somebody be so dismissive of that is terrible."

Thirty Finance Department employees also were displaced Tuesday when smoke filtered through a ventilation system. But they were expected to return today.

State officials contacted the FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms due to the heightened state of alert nationally, Chief Ranger Ralph Fairfield said, but FBI officials quickly dismissed the idea of the arson at the parks headquarters being a terrorist threat.

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Fire investigators gather in the charred hallway outside the human resources offices that burned early Tuesday morning at Santa Cruz City Hall.

Attacks

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A homeless activist was charged with felony vandalism, arson and burglary. Much of the prosecution's case stood on the statement of a woman who claimed the activist told her of the planned attack.

The charges were later dropped after the star witness was arrested in New Mexico for providing false information to federal authorities in an unrelated bomb case.

The State Parks office, also struck by arson early Tuesday, was hit hardest by the water vandals in 2001. The intentional flooding did \$250,000 in damage to the Ocean Street building and wrecked an additional \$100,000 in files and office materials.

In the hosings, someone used an exterior spigot, and hoses brought to the scene, to soak the inside of buildings, leaving water running overnight to maximize damage.

"I don't know if these people have a particular beef with us, state government or government in general," District Superintendent Dave Vincent said.

The hosings are still open cases, Santa Cruz police Lt. Joe Haebe said, "but I have one of those gut feelings (about who is responsible)."

He declined to elaborate.

The Sentinel also was a victim of the 2001 water vandalisms, as was a bakery owned by Santa Cruz Mayor Emily Reilly.

Considering no one took responsi-

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DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT

bility for the hosings, Santa Cruzans concocted their own theories. Some speculated the culprits were angry at the city for citing homeless people for sleeping on city streets and at state parks for a policy, new at the time, restricting the length of stays in Santa Cruz-area state campgrounds.

The campgrounds have long been popular with homeless RV campers, who use them as cheap living quarters.

While attacks aren't new to Santa Cruz, they're extremely rare statewide. Staffers at the California League of Cities could only think of one other case.

In West Sacramento, vandals did large-scale damage to a city hall in December 1999. The vandal used a hose to do about \$1 million damage to a three-story 14,000-square-foot set of offices rented by the city.

No arrests were made in the case.

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