

Early-morning fire destroys building

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SANTA CRUZ — Flames engulfed and destroyed the derelict Union Ice Company building Wednesday morning, sending a huge cloud of dark smoke over downtown and drawing hundreds of gawkers to watch firefighters fight the blaze.

"It just went poof," said one observer, standing on the corner of Chestnut and Laurel streets only moments after flames

erupted from the top of the ice house at about 7:20 a.m. He stared as the flames, small at first, grew rapidly and spread across the building's roof, sending a thick black smoke skyward.

"It looked like a big wall of flames just shot out of the side of the building," said Maria Lewis, one of many residents living on neighboring Myrtle Street whose homes were threatened by the fire. Lewis' bedroom is only about 20 yards from the building's side.



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Firefighter trains his hose on the blaze.

Local

Fire

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"I was worried about the wind shifting," she said. "It would have come in within five minutes."

Myrtle Street residents ran into the street dressed in nightgowns and clothes thrown on in haste, and stood watching the tower of smoke climb higher and higher as firefighters began spraying the building with water.

Within 10 minutes, as sirens split the air and fire engines streamed to the scene, the roof of the building had collapsed and the interior was a bright-orange inferno. Soon portions of the Myrtle Street side of the building began collapsing as well.

Police cordoned off the area as more engines were called to help battle the blaze. A group of reserve firefighters showed up and pulled on yellow firefighting jackets. Santa Cruz Fire Chief Ed Ekers pointed them toward the front of the building to man a hose.

"You're going to see fire," Ekers warned the reserves. "This thing is really burning."

As firefighters continued to arrive, so did onlookers, many with video and still cameras. A group of rumpled campers emerged from the nearby Neary Lagoon area and walked past the blaze, on their way to the corner 7-Eleven for morning cups of coffee, then returned to watch the building burn as they sipped from steaming cups.

Firefighters sprayed the blaze from every angle and an aerial hose sprayed water from high above the building down into the crumbled, red-hot remnants of the roof.

Among those watching was City Water Director Bill Kocher, who said the blaze would consume 1 million to 1.5 million gallons of water before it was contained. Kocher said the fire would not place any significant strain on the already drought-strained water system, though, saying the amount of water consumed would come to about one-tenth of the system's average daily usage.

Kocher estimated that about one family's monthly ration of water was being poured on the blaze each minute when the fire was raging full bore.

At about 8:30 a.m., the side of the building near Logos Book Store collapsed slowly, hitting the ground and sending a sudden, 50-foot wave of flame toward firefighters.

One firefighter had to scramble into the cab of an engine to avoid the rush of flame. But none of the more than 40 firefighters who battled the blaze were reported injured, according to fire officials.

The ice house, known as a haven for derelicts and illegal campers, had been the site of more than 20 fires in the past two years. In November 1987 a similar blaze broke out at the site that covered downtown



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Firefighters pour water on the ice plant rubble as the flames die down Wednesday morning.

Santa Cruz in smoke and destroyed much of the building.

The ice house property is owned by local developers Maynard Manson and Jeff Canepa, who said Wednesday that they had been waiting for federal funds to pay for demolishing the building. Manson and Canepa have long had plans to build an office/retail center at the site and said after the fire Wednes-

day that they hope to begin building within 90 days.

By mid-afternoon the fire was contained and tractors had been called to the scene to help uncover still-burning embers which firefighters would then extinguish. Fire officials expected the clean-up to go on into the night.

Officials said the destruction was so complete the cause of the fire will probably never be known.

"There's so much damage and debris there that there's not a whole lot left to look at," said Santa Cruz Deputy Chief George Lopez.

According to Chief Ekers, the destruction of the decrepit building was not entirely unexpected.

"We always felt that (a major fire) would happen again," Ekers said as his crews battled the blaze in the background.