

Repair work to blame in 911 failure

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— **Mel Angel, administrator of county Emergency Services Department**

By **JOHN ROBINSON**
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — A failure in the 911 emergency system, brought to light when a Boulder Creek house caught fire Tuesday, was caused by a technician who disconnected a circuit bank which left dispatchers unable to page firefighters.

Volunteer firefighters were finally reached by phone at a Boulder Creek hardware store. By the time they arrived at the fire, close to a half hour later, the house and surrounding woods

■ **Neighbors rally around local fire victims — Page A4**

were in flame. The house burned to the ground.

Boulder Creek Fire Chief Bud Tomlin said it was unlikely that firefighters could have saved the house even if they had been paged on time.

"After talking to the occupant I believe the fire was well involved under the house (before it was reported),"

Tomlin said. "We may have saved a lot of the structure, but the house still would have been totaled."

It was 10 minutes after the fire was reported before emergency dispatchers discovered there was a problem.

According to Mel Angel, administrator of the county Emergency Services Department, dispatchers first paged Boulder Creek firefighters at 3:32 p.m. A second dispatch went out at 3:38 p.m.

"We tend to wait a little longer (for contact) because it's a volunteer department," Angel said. "If it had been Santa

Cruz or Aptos, and it (a response) doesn't come back in 30 seconds, we know we have a problem."

According to Angel, a county technician was working on the system when he pulled a circuit bank which controlled the fire channel. A backup transmitter had been turned on, Angel said, but the technician didn't realize it was hooked through the main circuit board.

"He had put the backup system on standby at noon," Angel said. "But when he pulled the circuit it disrupted the power."

Please see REPAIR — A4

A-4—Santa Cruz Sentinel — Thursday, Oct. 13, 1988

Repair/ Technician disconnected circuit bank

Continued from Page A1

"When they realized there was an equipment failure, the radio technician started looking for the problem and realized that he had to jump the main circuit board," Angel said.

It took the technician about 10 minutes to locate the problem, Angel said.

In the meantime, dispatchers were "scrambling" to reach firefighters. They apparently called firefighters home numbers, other fire stations and dispatched sheriff's deputies in an attempt to find firefighters.

According to Tomlin, firefighters were notified by a junior volunteer firefighter who was monitoring emergency channels at San Lorenzo Valley High School.

After hearing that operators were unable to raise the station, the youth contacted Felton firefighters, who were at an auto accident near the school. The Felton firefighters then called Boulder Creek fire captains John Grimaldi and Pep Rocca, who worked at the Boulder Creek True Value Hardware store.

Grimaldi and Rocca quickly called the emergency services hotline to find the location of the fire and sounded the station's fire alarm.

Fire fighting units did not arrive until 4:01 p.m.

Angel said the county is changing the system so that such a mishap cannot happen again.

"It was a design feature he (the technician) wouldn't know about until he ran across it," Angel said.

"It's like buying a new car and discovering the turn signals are reversed."

The equipment being worked on is 20 years old and requires frequent expansion and updating, Angel said.

"When you start expanding and intermixing equipment, you don't know what you are tied into."

Some of the equipment is slated for replacement, Angel said. New consoles for the dispatchers and other equipment could be replaced by next May or June, Angel said.

The cause of the blaze is still unknown, and investigation has been hampered by the severity of the blaze, according to Mike Martin, a fire captain for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

"The area of origin was so heavily involved, there's not much left to look at," Martin said. "In one area of the house, there's nothing left right down to the soil. The (foundation) beams were burned level to the cement pier blocks."

The trees surrounding the Bosso's house were scorched, and the fire had spread out into the surrounding wildland, Martin said. Concerned that other homes were in danger, firefighters attacked the wildland blaze first, delaying the attack on the house fire, Martin said.

Firefighters were aided by a breezeless day, Martin said, which prevented the fire from "spotting" into other areas.

"We're lucky we're not talking about a major fire all the way up to Empire Grade," Martin said.

Sentinel staff writer Maria Gaura contributed to this report.