

Wrecking crew rips into hotel to get at fire

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SANTA CRUZ — Wrecking crews tore down walls on the Pacific Avenue side of the St. George Hotel Monday night so firefighters could put out a stubborn blaze that has smoldered in the south end of the building since Sunday afternoon.

A demolition crew worked through the night, knocking down walls from the old County Bank building to a firewall at the center of the building so firefighters could pour water on the blaze. Damage from the fire and from the Oct. 17 earthquake made the building too dangerous for firefighters to re-enter, Fire Chief Ed Ekers said.

After inspecting the building Monday and meeting with Public Works Director Larry Erwin and engineer Jim Bass, who represents hotel owner Barry Swenson, Ekers called in the heavy equipment as the only means of getting to the seed of the blaze.

Earlier Monday, Ekers said he found evidence of attempts to start at least two fires inside the building. In both cases, he said, small fires had been set in corners on the second floor. But, he said, he could not immediately determine whether those fires were set Sunday or at some earlier time.

Detectives also are continuing to question a transient who has arrested Sunday for investigation of arson.

How much more of the building would have to be demolished and what that would do to preservationists' attempts in court to save the 96-year-old hotel would depend on how much farther the fire spread before the walls came tumbling down.

"We are going to try to just take down the areas where there's fire. We want to cause as little impact to the rest of the building as possible," Bass said.

Bass estimated that one-third of the hotel — from the lobby to the bank building — might have to come down. He said the fire had burned through the third

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floor to the second and was smoldering in the ceiling of the first floor in what is being called the south Pacific Avenue wing.

Compounding the earthquake damage, Bass said, was the smoke from the fire and the more than 2 million gallons of water that had been poured on the building fighting it.

Bass said even without the fire, he was convinced that the building was so badly damaged by the earthquake that it should be razed.

The fate of the St. George has been up in the air since the quake, with preservationists fighting Swenson's attempts to bring it down.

Just last week, attorneys for local, state and national preservation groups appealed a local judge's ruling that favored the city's approval of demolition permits.

Assistant City Attorney Kate Anderton said she called the Sixth District Court of Appeal to inform the justices of the fire and that part of the building might have to be demolished.

"Obviously we would be very distressed if we find out that someone had set the fire with the intent to destroy the building," said Los Angeles attorney Bill Delvac, who represents the preservation groups. "I don't think it's in the city's interest to have the issue resolved in this way. I'm sure the city is as distressed as we are," Delvac said.

Delvac said he believes enough would remain standing today that the hotel will continue to be worth saving. He also said the issue of demolishing historic buildings remains important because the fate of other damaged buildings downtown may hinge on what happens to the St. George.

Santa Cruz Police Department Lt. Jeff Locke said detectives are still questioning the transient who witnesses said they saw running from an alcove of the hotel just as the fire broke out Sunday.

The suspect's true identity has not been established. Locke said the man identified himself as John Robert Miller, and gave his age as 27. But, Locke said, detention officers believe he had been booked previously as a Gregory Roger or Gregory Allen Johnston.

The man was originally arrested for trying to panhandle a police official at the scene of the fire Sunday night. As he was being arrested, witnesses told officers that they had seen him running from the building.

Locke said the suspect has denied being in the building and said he had walked up from the transit center after noticing the smoke.

Doni Tunheim, a spokeswoman for Friends of the St. George, called for an "complete and unbiased" investigation of the fire by the state Fire Marshal's Office.

"Because of the city's stance (on demolition) we don't feel they're in the best situation to investigate," she said.

Ekers said the fire will be investigated as any fire would be and would include assistance from the state Fire Marshal's Office. Inspectors from that office in San Leandro had been on the scene since early Monday morning, he explained.

Tunheim criticized the lack of security for the building. "Frankly we had expected it. It was vulnerable. We were all crossing our fingers, hoping it wouldn't come to this," she said.

Tunheim said the city and Swenson should have taken better precautions.

Once the fire is out, Tunheim said her group wants a full and independent structural survey of what remains.

Not everyone was upset by the flames which con-

tinued to lick at the windows of the hotel throughout the day.

"I have no problem with the fire. We need to get rid of it. We've got to get on with rebuilding the mall," said Carla Walton, owner of the Graphfix poster store across the street from the St. George.

She said her business has been off 50 percent since the earthquake because the street has been closed because of the perilous condition of the hotel. Until last weekend only a small walkway from Locust Street was open to her building. "We've been totally isolated," she said.

Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt called the fire "terribly sad" and said it was one more tragedy the city had to endure.

"I don't think anybody in Santa Cruz, whether they thought the hotel should be saved or not, wanted to deal with this as another crisis," Wormhoudt said.

"When I was down there Sunday night, I saw little kids tightly hanging onto their parents. They looked so worried.

"Everywhere people looked so sad. It's just another crisis for people who have had more than they can take," Wormhoudt said.

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