Fire destroys circuit court

Adjoining businesses suffer some smoke, water damage

By ANDREW BINION
and AMYJO BROWN
of the East Oregonian

HERMISTON — State officials are investigating arson as a possible cause to a fire that destroyed the Umatilla County Circuit Court facilities in Hermiston early this morning.

Three Hermiston fire trucks and a Stanfield unit responded to the blaze in the brick shopping plaza on the 200 block of East Main Street at about 3 a.m. The fire burned so hot it cracked the glass and melted the blinds in nearby storefronts. No injuries were reported.

As rain drizzled over the charred remains at about 8 a.m., Fire Marshall Pat Hart said he was waiting for arson investigators from the Oregon State Police. No possible causes for the fire were immediately known.

The State Fire Marshal's office and other arson investigators were called while firefighters were still spraying water on the building, said Hermiston Fire Chief Jim Stearns.

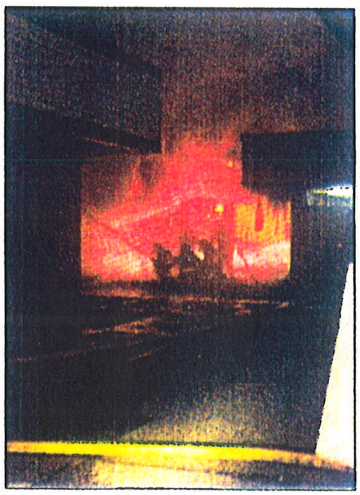
"Because it's the courthouse, we have to initially assume it's suspicious," said Hart.

Local responders were unable to enter the building this morning to estimate damages. Stearns said an air-conditioning unit on the badly damaged roof made entering the charred remains too dangerous.

Paper files in the court facility provided fuel for the fire, Stearns said, which took about a half-hour to extinguish.

All the paper records can be recreated, said Court Operations Supervisor Judie Stark, who stood this morning near the gutted building with a gathering group of spectators.

She said all the records are stored on computers and copies can be retrieved in Pendleton. Older records not stored electronically are kept in a different building, she said.



Staff photo by Andrew Binion

Firefighters battle a blaze early Monday morning that destroyed the Umatilla County's Circuit Court facility in Hermiston.

The fire did not spread to adjoining businesses, but Andee's Boutique experienced smoke and some water damage. IJ Gems experienced light smoke damage.

Beth Purves, owner of the Allstate Insurance agency around the corner from the county's court facilities, arrived on the scene expecting the worst, but her office on Main Street was not damaged. She said she had just installed a remote computer connection so she could do work from home.

"I figured this would be a good opportunity to use it," she said.

Other buildings, across from the circuit court, had damaged windows and minor smoke damage.

Circuit Court Judge Jeff Wallace arrived this morning to the scene. He said he was flabbergasted. He said knew of no reason to suspect arson as the fire's cause.

"You are always suspicious, but I really have no basis to say that," Wallace said.

The courthouse handled traffic infractions, divorces and criminal trials.

The county is currently building new court and county office facilities on the south end of town near the armory and Blue Mountain Community College. County office space is now sprinkled around town. The new facility is scheduled for completion in March of 2006.

Court appearances to be rescheduled

By AMYJO BROWN
of the East Oregonian

HERMISTON — Court Operations Supervisor Judie Stark looked at the young man's notice to appear in court for a traffic violation and wrote his name on her clipboard this morning as she stood in a drizzling rain near the charred remains of the Hermiston Circuit Court.

More than 30 people arrived this morning for their scheduled court appearances and were sent back home. An early-morning fire destroyed the building housing the courtrooms on the 200 block of East Main Street.

"You'll get a new notice to appear," Stark told the man. "Be sure to read it really well so you know where to appear."

Trial Court Administrator Bill Jones said all cases to be heard in the west-end circuit court will be moved to the Umatilla County Courthouse in Pendleton. Those that are time-sensitive will be a priority, he said, but the rest will likely be delayed a month or more as his staff recreates the records that were lost in the fire.

Nearly 99 percent of the files lost can be recovered, he said. Copies of all electronic files were saved on servers in Pendleton.

As of this morning, Jones said he was unsure how the re-scheduling of cases would work and he said he was talking with Umatilla County commissioners, the Umatilla County District Attorney and officials at the state Judicial Department in order to devise a plan.

The Umatilla County Courthouse has only three courtrooms, and Jones said squeezing more cases in would be a challenge.

"We'll cram there here, there and everywhere," Jones said, adding it would be temporary.

The Circuit Court is leased by the county from a private owner, and most of the equipment inside belonged to the state, Jones said.

Fire burns circuit courthouse

Herald photo by Joyce Hensley

Hermiston Fire Marshal Tom Bohm, left, and Randy Keeney, Hermiston building inspector, discuss the fire that destroyed the Umatilla County Circuit Court building Monday.

Contributed photo

Firefighters battle the blaze that broke out in the Umatilla County Circuit Court in Hermiston early Monday morning.

Neighboring law office, businesses suffer damage

By Joyce Hensley
Staff writer

HERMISTON — Circuit court, a law office and two downtown Hermiston businesses suffered fire and smoke damage when a fire broke out in the circuit court building early Monday morning.

The Hermiston Fire Department received the fire call at 2:55 a.m. and rushed to the scene.

"It started right in the front. It got real hot fast," said Bryon Demos, Hermiston firefighter. "It's classified as a rapid high energy fire."

In the few minutes it took for Hermiston firefighters to respond to the blaze, flames were shooting high above the roof.

Also damaged were neighboring businesses, I.J. Gems and Andee's, as well as the law office of Kurt Bendixsen. Each of them suffered heavy smoke damage.

Investigating the fire are the Hermiston fire marshal, the Oregon State Police arson squad, a federal agent from the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosive (ATFE), and an OSP canine detection team. The Stanfield Fire Department also responded to the scene.

"At this point it's too early to tell if it's an accelerant or incendiary fire," said Detective Dennis Wagner, a member of the OSP bomb squad. "We're getting a team ready to get started."

Before investigators and firefighters could enter the burned out building, the roof had to be secured.

Flames had gutted the building, destroying timbers that held up the roof rendering the structure unsafe for firefighters. Also adding to the danger was a large air conditioning unit, already tipping, that was sitting precariously on the roof.

Firefighters were forced to battle the blaze from outside the burning building.

"We're not going in until it's safe. That roof holds a large air conditioning unit. It could fall in at any time," said Hermiston Fire Captain Pat Hart. "Plywood sheeting is all that's holding it up."

Gilliland Construction was contracted to remove the roof top air conditioner, and to render the structure safe for firefighters, investigators, and security to enter the burned out building.

"We'll use a crane to hook to the air conditioning unit," said Michael Gilliland.

Notices of a temporary court location will be sent to the 30 cases that were to be heard by Umatilla County Circuit Court Judge Jeffrey Wallace Monday, according to Judy Stark, court operations supervisor.

Bill Jones, Umatilla County Circuit Court administrator, says he and Wallace immediately started working to find another facility to hold court proceedings.

"We'll get up and running as soon as we can," said Jones.

Jones also said that legal files are safe.

"Almost all files have been backed up on tape," Jones said. "The tapes are removed off site every afternoon."

Heat from the blaze broke office windows across the alley from the burning structure.

The owner of the building, Nancy Brown, said she was fully insured.

Security will maintain around-the-clock patrol of the damaged structures.

"My insurance company is also paying for security," said Brown.

Hermiston Fire Marshal Tom Bohm asks for help from the public.

"If anyone has any leads, get hold of the Hermiston Police Department or us," said Bohm.

Anyone who has information is asked to call the Hermiston Police at 567-5519, or the Hermiston Fire Department at 567-8822.