

Firefighters battle structure fire: Water supply and wind were major obstacles to overcome

Written by Susan Wolf

Wednesday, 10 November 2010 15:57



A fire that nearly destroyed a house at 65 Dorethy Road Sunday night has been ruled accidental by Fire Marshal Joe Paola.

“We have the area of origin and are looking for the cause, which we expect to narrow to one of two things,” he said Monday morning. By Tuesday, Mr. Paola said there may have been a spark from the fireplace that “was more likely the cause of the fire.”

Mr. Paola and Ken Christensen of the state fire marshal’s office were at the scene Monday morning and continued their investigation throughout the day. After his investigation is complete, he said, the insurance company will send in its investigators.

The house belongs to Bernard Wharton, who was not home at the time the fire started, said Mr. Paola. Jennifer Walsh came home and discovered the fire, and then called 911. Georgetown Fire Chief Mike Heibeck said she was taken to the hospital to be treated for smoke inhalation.

Mr. Heibeck said Assistant Fire Chief Greg Zap was initially in charge at the scene. When Chief Heibeck, who had been out of town, arrived at the scene, he took command.

The fire started around 6:30 p.m., he said, and when the firefighters arrived, there were flames coming out the front door and windows.

The major challenge was getting water to the fire, he said. There is no hydrant and the house is at the end of a long and narrow driveway that is at least one-quarter mile long, the fire chief said.

Ridgefield Fire Chief Heather Burford was on the scene, helping with the effort, and called for a Ridgefield ATV to help ferry firefighters from Dorethy Road to the house.

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Firefighters had to lay down a five-inch water supply the entire length of the driveway, about 2,200 feet of line, Mr. Heibeck said. Two portable tanks were set up at the end of the road and had to be supplied by tankers.

“We called in tankers from surrounding towns and manpower, which helped a lot,” Chief Heibeck said. The tankers filled the portable tanks and then had to be driven to a fire hydrant on Route 107, be filled and then driven back to the scene of the fire.

Besides the Georgetown Volunteer Fire Department, the town’s other two fire departments — West Redding and Redding Fire and EMS Co. #1 — assisted at the scene, as well as fire departments from Ridgefield, Weston and Bethel. In all, there were 45 to 50 firefighters at the scene, Chief Heibeck said.

When fighting the fire, Chief Heibeck said the structure of the house made it difficult to get to the second floor “because of the way it was configured. The wind didn’t help either,” he said. “The wind kept shifting the direction of the fire.”

Winds were gusting up to 25 mph Sunday night.

Chief Heibeck said the flames would be coming out of the windows and then the wind would blow them back into the house. The wind and having to shuttle water to the fire were the main things working against the firefighters, he added.

The fire was declared out at 10:25 p.m., but some firefighters were there until about midnight, according to the fire chief.

“We had a fire watch overnight to make sure there was no rekindle,” he said.

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Mr. Paola said he was called to the scene around 10:15.

He said some firefighters secured the scene since he didn't want to start any investigation without lights.

"The fire departments did a great job," he said, "because the structure is rebuildable... They saved the building."

Route 107 did not have to be closed during the fire since the house was so far from the road. The nearby Benedictine Grange was not impacted by the fire.

The structure fire on Dorethy Road was one of three fire calls over the weekend. The West Redding department responded to a problem at a house on Long Ridge Road with a fireplace and chimney on Saturday, Nov. 6, at 8:25 a.m. Redding Ridge was called to put out a kitchen fire on Middle Brook Pond Road at 12:02 p.m.

Jack Sanders, executive editor, Hersam Acorn Newspapers, contributed to this story.