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Total devastation in Lafayette Circle fire

By Nick Marnell



100 Lafayette Circle after the fire Photo courtesy ConFire

employee who assisted Rossi then left, and Assadi locked up the restaurant, noticing nothing at all out of order. "Whatever happened after that, I have no idea," Assadi said.

Whatever happened after that, arrived in a fury from the depths of hell.

"I've never been close to a wildfire or any kind of serious fire before, but I'll tell you the sound it made was mind-boggling. It sounded like a jet taking off, or a tornado. I've never seen or heard anything quite like it before," Lafayette resident Mark Robinson said.

By the time Capt. Jared Palant and his ConFire engine company arrived at the scene near midnight, the building at 100 Lafayette Circle was completely engulfed in flames.

"We knew instantly this was huge by the number of 911 calls we got," Marshall said. "Unless we had been there 30 minutes earlier, there was no way we were saving that building."

Palant immediately called for a third alarm. "A wood-sided building, with a shake roof, surrounded by two-story apartment buildings and another two-story commercial building, a eucalyptus tree - our goal was to contain the fire to the building of origin," he said. "We had to prevent large chunks of ash from landing on the roofs of the neighboring buildings."

Crews pumped water out of five hydrants to fight the fire, requiring thousands of gallons of extra water from the East Bay Municipal Utility District; a typical fire would need one hydrant. "It was the biggest fire I've ever seen as the captain of a first-responding unit," said Palant, an eight-year ConFire veteran.

"I was afraid the whole town would go," Marilyn Finn, a 101 Lafayette Circle resident, said. "It's a miracle that they held it to that one building."

Nearly 50 firefighters contained the blaze within two hours, and several fire personnel remained on the scene throughout the day. The fire caused an estimated \$1.1 million in damage with no reported injuries. Stunned tenants and residents caught their first glimpse of the devastation Thursday morning, the historic building constructed in the 1970s burnt to the ground.

Assadi heard the news at 6:30 a.m. "I'm in shock," he said. "I just don't understand. How could a fire spread that quickly?" Assadi said he wants to reopen La Finestra as soon as possible, and he is searching for a suitable location in the city.

He praised, and expressed pain for, his employees, particularly server Tony Lavino, whom he called a local icon. "I want to have my people back," a crushed Assadi said.

"All of our work was saved in the cloud," said Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Jay Lifson, scrambling to help displaced tenants find new locations. He landed a temporary home for the Chamber at Stanley Middle School and an additional meeting location at the Stanley Smith Insurance agency.

Marta Chavalas of Skincare by Marta said finding a new location has been difficult because of the tight real estate market. "I would like to stay in Lafayette, if possible," she said.

One business owner at 110 Lafayette Circle, unaffected directly by the incident, was moved by the response of Lafayette residents. Heidi Simarro of Phoenix Skincare and Waxing said that nothing was even singed at her building, and other than parking problems because of the newly fenced-off area, she was doing OK. "Competitors called and offered me space," she said. "I almost cried when I heard that."

Lifson plans a meeting with the displaced tenants to go over his attempts to secure government loans and Workforce Development assistance from Contra Costa County.

According to Lafayette Chief of Police Eric Christensen, the property has been released to its insurance company which will conduct its own investigation. After the investigation the property manager, Wells and Bennett of Walnut Creek, will handle removal of the debris. Christensen estimated the process will take several months.

Lafayette City Manager Steve Falk said he will set up a meeting with Lafayette Circle property owners to discuss reasonable and appropriate land use opportunities in the area, an area to be long remembered as the site of one of the city's most spectacular structure fires.



The morning after. Photo Nick Marnell



The Lafayette Chamber offices and other businesses in flames. ConFire

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