

Source: Spinal Column Newsweekly

Arson cases up in some communities; economy cited as factor

by Lisa Brody

September 02, 2009

Statistics from the past few years provided by county and local public safety officials indicate arson fires are on the rise in most area communities, an expected result of troubled economic times. Unpaid bills, looming home foreclosures, car repossessions, and tax collectors are among the factors that fire investigators cite as causes behind a growing number of suspicious fires. Those aren't the only motivating factors.

"With certain fires, you say, 'Who's mad at you?' 'Who broke up with you?'" said Art Schrah, a fire investigator with the Oakland County Sheriff's Department.

"There are certain trends with arson," he said. "Financial is a key one. So is a relationship gone bad. There are some revenge-type fires. Some people want to get rid of a drug house in their neighborhood. They've just had it. It's the same thing with abandoned houses in the area. And then there are juveniles playing with matches."

The Oakland County Fire Investigation Unit is recognized as one of the best in the country. It has four full-time fire investigators, all trained to investigate suspicious fires. The department also has its own full-time lab technician who is able to assess the collected data and help determine whether a fire under investigation is a case of arson or accidental.

"It's rare that we have to call the lab technician out to the scene, because we have all been trained in the proper way to bring evidence in," Schrah said. "Normally, it's possible to collect it and bring it in to them."

The department also has a fire investigation dog, Blaze, one of only five in the state. Blaze has received extensive training to indicate the exact location of a fire's origin. He is also able to identify and track the residue on fire-starting materials and suspects. He is currently certified to detect 16 different accelerants, with training on more continuing.

Many fire departments in Oakland County, including in the lakes areas, rely on the Oakland County Fire Investigation Unit because the local departments don't have the funding and manpower to completely investigate suspicious fires. County investigators don't come out to a fire site until a local fire marshal requests their assistance.

Local departments and Oakland County personnel sometimes work with State Police troopers to investigate suspicious fire. The state investigators sponsor a statewide arson tip line along with Michigan Arson Prevention Committee. The toll-free number — 1-800-44-ARSON — receives tips and forwards them on to the appropriate fire or police department. If there is an arrest and/or conviction, the tipster may receive a reward of up to \$5,000.

"There have been a lot of arrests and convictions from this hot line," Schrah said.

In some circumstances, local and state investigators also work with private insurance companies, who may choose to bring in private fire investigators to probe a fire.

"They provide us with a lot of extra help," Schrah said.

In 2007, there were 155 fire investigations in Oakland County. Five of those fires were fatal, resulting in six deaths. Of those, 44 were determined to be arson fires, and 35 were undetermined. There were 20 arrests, 19 of which were for felony offenses. Estimated property value loss due to fires was estimated at \$19.91 million.

In 2008, there were 191 fires investigated in the county, and 67 were determined to be arson cases. There were six fire-related fatalities that year, and 29 arrests were made. Estimated property loss was estimated at \$27.12

million.

As of press time, there have been 123 fires investigated in the county during 2009, and 22 arrests made.

The following is a look at recent arson statistics and investigation needs in the lakes area communities.

..... COMMERCE TOWNSHIP

The Commerce Township Fire Department works with sheriff's department investigators to probe all arson and possible arson fires.

"Todd Martin, our fire Marshal, works hand-in-hand with the Oakland County Sheriff's Department," said Commerce Fire Chief Joe Schornack.

The Commerce department is always first on the scene at any fire, and makes a determination on whether to contact county staff. Martin then works with the county's specially-trained investigators and lab technician to ascertain a fire's specific cause, find the alleged perpetrator(s), and follow the case to the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office.

Schornack said he's noticed a spike in arson activity as the economy has plummeted.

"When people are hit with home foreclosure and can't pay their bills, we see more homes set on fire, and vehicles set on fire," he said. "We can usually spot them as arson."

In 2007, of the 97 fires in Commerce Township, five were determined to be suspicious, with a total amount of property loss pegged at \$175,000. That was a 6 percent increase from 2006 figures.

In 2008, Commerce witnessed an 11 percent increase in arson fires, with 10 of the year's 94 fires being suspicion. Property loss totaled about \$190,000.

So far in 2009, two of the 46 fires in the township have been suspicious, with no loss of property or contents reported.

"They were just a couple of small arson fires; one was an old car, and the other was inside an abandoned building," Schornack said.

Wolverine Lake gets fire services from the Commerce Township Fire Department. All figures cited above for Commerce include Wolverine Lake statistics.

WALLED LAKE

The Walled Lake Fire Department employs two certified fire investigators. When more help is needed, firefighters call in the sheriff's department unit.

According to Walled Lake Fire Marshal James Coomer, Jr., all fires are investigated to determine the area of origin and cause.

"Michigan law presumes all fires are accidental until proven otherwise," he said. "All accidental causes must be eliminated before a fire is determined to be an arson fire."

Fire crews are trained to identify suspicious fires. If a fire appears suspect, firefighters secure the area and notify fire investigators.

"We call upon the sheriff's department because they have more resources, including an accelerant sniffing canine," Coomer said.

Fire investigation is a strenuous and dirty job, according to Coomer. Professionals must be knowledgeable in fire behavior and suppression, building construction, scene excavation, and evidence collection. Fire investigators usually work from the least damaged to the most damaged areas, uncovering charred debris and collecting evidence. The scene is fully documented by photographs, video, and diagrams.

"Generally, there's a lot of debris that is required to be examined," Coomer said. "There's a lot of digging using shovels, pry bars, and axes. Evidence is examined, documented, and properly collected and placed in evidence containers."

The Walled Lake Fire Department has responded to 40 structure fires and 11 vehicles fires since January 2007. Two fires were categorized as arson. One person was arrested and charged with arson, but was found incompetent to stand trial. The second case was at the hands of a juvenile who was turned over to Lakes Area Youth Assistance.

Walled Lake reported no injuries as a result of arson fires in recent years.

According to Coomer, the low number of arson cases in the city is directly related to how well-illuminated the community is.

"We haven't experienced a spike in arson cases," he said. "Our community is well-lit and arsonists, like burglars, fear light. Our fire department has an excellent response time, and has highly-trained firefighters. Our police officers are constantly on patrol and our citizens are vigilant in reporting suspicious activity."

WATERFORD

The Waterford Fire Department staffs a team of four certified fire investigators to conduct arson probes. According to Fire Marshal Fred Arnold, certain protocols must be followed before a fire is determined to be a case of arson.

"We do fire investigations and don't label it an arson until it's determined through a series of steps, like deciding where the point of origin is, how the fire started, and the motive of the people involved," he said. "For example, if the person is behind in their house payment and their financial records are burned up, that's suspect. It's easy to see what happened, but harder to say how and who."

Since no two cases are the same, arson investigations vary in length and can take between 24 hours and 24 months, according to Arnold.

The township's four arson investigators have a variety of duties within the fire department. Arnold oversees inspections and investigations; one investigator works a 24-hour shift and runs engines and responds to medical emergencies and fires; and the other two perform firefighter duties in addition to conducting inspections.

Arson investigators use rudimentary tools for determining a fire's cause. They use power inverters for lighting after hours, cameras, shovels, and miscellaneous tools to dig through debris.

"This is the lowest high-tech job in the department," Arnold said. "We do send samples to the police labs to see if gasoline was used to start a fire, but other than that, it's a matter of digging through debris."

While the department handles the bulk of each fire investigation, it does occasionally call upon the sheriff's department fire unit for assistance.

"We may need a canine to sniff out accelerants, for example," Arnold said. "We also work alongside our township police department on arson arrests."

The number of arson cases in the township has continued to climb over the last several years. Two known arson

fires occurred in 2007. Both cases resulted in arrests, and no injuries were reported. Numbers have doubled from 2008 to 2009. Five fires were determined to be arson cases in 2008, with only two arrests made and one individual sustaining injuries. To date in 2009, 10 known arson fires have occurred, with one case resulting in an arrest.

No fatalities have occurred, but there were injuries reported requiring hospitalization due to either smoke inhalation or burns.

"Although numbers are up this year, we are still in the midst of investigating these cases," Arnold said. "They may be related, but at this point we don't know."

Despite the rise in arson cases, Arnold said he doesn't see any noticeable trends.

"Back in the 1980s, we saw people burning their cars and vans because of poor gas mileage," he said. "They couldn't sell them or get rid of them, so they'd burn them for insurance purposes. We aren't seeing any trends like that — they're more random and for different reasons."

WIXOM

Wixom public safety officials forward all arson investigations to the sheriff's department unit for investigation.

According to Wixom Assistant Fire Chief Jerry Musilowski, there is a protocol that must be followed once the fire department suspects arson.

"We contact the county, which comes in to see if there is any validity to the claim of arson," he said. "These cases could be labeled undetermined or accidental. We work with them to determine cause, and then hand the entire investigation over to them."

While Wixom firefighters assist county personnel sift through wreckage, insurance companies often send a representative of their own to investigate suspicious fires.

"They may send an electrical technician or an investigator to work alongside Oakland County," Musilowski said.

In 2007, two arson fires occurred in the city. There was one arson fire investigated in 2008. Thus far in 2009 there have been no arson fires in the city.

MILFORD TOWNSHIP

Milford Fire Chief Larry Waligora said the township has had only one suspected arson case in the last three years, and it's still under investigation.

"We have the sheriff's department investigate any suspicious fire, which is not necessarily arson," he said. "We use them because they're more knowledgeable and trained in doing an investigation for a cause or origin."

The suspected arson cases took place on April 11, 2009, when eight fires were discovered along the horse trail inside the Kensington Metropark. James Richard Atkinson, a 24-year-old White Lake Township resident, is the suspect in the case.

Atkinson was arrested after a 46-year-old Milford Township resident allegedly saw him trying to light a field on fire along the horse trail. The witness reportedly chased the suspect on a mountain bike, traveling south along the trail until he finally caught up with Atkinson near Mitten Bay off Huron River Parkway. The man then tackled the suspect as he allegedly was trying to start another fire.

Another resident witnessed the struggle and alerted a passing sheriff's department deputy on patrol.

Additional deputies eventually arrived on the scene, along with the department's fire investigation unit personnel.

The Milford Fire Department and nearby residents extinguished the fires, which ranged from 10-feet-by-10-feet to approximately 2.5 acres in size.

Atkinson was arraigned in 52-1 District Court on April 12. He was ordered by Judge Dennis Powers to undergo an oral swab test for DNA testing to determine whether he was involved in other arson cases.

The exam was originally scheduled for July 29, but has been rescheduled for Wednesday, Sept. 30.

Atkinson faces two charges of arson-burned wood or prairies, a four-year felony crime, and up to eight years in prison, if convicted.

WEST BLOOMFIELD TOWNSHIP

West Bloomfield Fire Marshal Pat Riney said suspicious or incendiary fires have risen in recent years, and he suspects that it's because some residents are intentionally setting their own properties ablaze to collect insurance money.

"I would suspect it's due to the economy," he said. "People are trying to get out of debt by eliminating a liability and committing insurance fraud."

So far in 2009, the West Bloomfield Fire Department has investigated 19 fires, with three of them ruled as arson cases. All of the arson cases are still under investigation.

In 2008, the department investigated 37 fires, ruling six of them arson fires. There were fire arson fires in the township during 2007.

"There are various factors when looking for evidence of arson," Riney said. "Sometimes it's pouring gasoline, or there are other ways of setting a fire. A lot of times we can prove it, but finding the person responsible is hard."

Riney added that the township fire department conducts its own investigations, with himself and firefighter Byron Turnquist in charge.

"We pull double-duty on top of investigating fires," he said. "We have shovels, axes, bars for prying and hitting and breaking. We also have knives, paint cans, cameras, and plastic bags. It's not glamorous," he said.

He added that both he and Turnquist are paramedics, and also work on inspections and fire prevention.

HIGHLAND

When a suspicious fire occurs in Highland Township, Fire Chief James Crunk said the department calls in the county's fire investigators.

"For the last three years, 2007, 2008, and so far in 2009, we've only had two arson fires total," Crunk said. "They only resulted in damaged property; there were no injuries."

WHITE LAKE

Like Highland Township, White Lake Township also utilizes the county's fire investigation unit when suspicious fires occur, according to White Lake Fire Department Captain Ted Lilley.

In 2007 there were 3 arson fires in the township. In 2008 there were 2 arsons fire cases in White Lake. In 2009, to date, there have been.

In December 2008, the department offered a reward for information after a vehicle was set on fire in the the 3000 block of White Lake Road.

According to White Lake police, a black 2007 Chevy Silverado was parked in the driveway of the residence and the fire was noticed by a newspaper delivery driver who called in the fire.

When police arrived, the owner of the vehicle was not home but was notified of the fire by police over the phone.

During an initial investigation, the fire was said to have been deliberately set by an unknown number of people. The fire started on the inside passenger seat of the vehicle. The county arson unit was called in to aid in the arson investigation.

The vehicle, said to be worth \$35,000, was completely destroyed.

No one was hurt but a reward of \$5,000 was offered for information leading to the conclusion of the case.