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Arson suspect ordered to have forensic exam

by Michael Shelton

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A White Lake Township resident suspected in a string of eight arson fires inside the Kensington Metropark in Milford Township was ordered to undergo a forensic exam and had his bail increased to \$50,000 while appearing Wednesday, April 29 in 52-1 District Court in Novi.

James Richard Atkinson, 24, faces two counts of arson-burned wood or prairies, a four-year felony crime, and up to eight years in prison if convicted.

Atkinson is now scheduled for a review on Wednesday, July 29 at 1 p.m., where his forensic exam report for competency and criminal responsibility will be presented. It will be determined at that time whether he is competent to stand trial.

Judge Dennis Powers of the 52-1 District Court ordered Atkinson to undergo an oral swab test for DNA testing to determine whether he was involved in other arson cases.

Atkinson is being held in the Oakland County Jail and his bond, which was originally set at \$10,000, can be paid in cash or surety.

Atkinson is a suspect in eight fires that were discovered along the horse trail in Kensington Metropark on Saturday, April 11. He was arrested after a 46-year-old Milford Township resident allegedly saw him trying to light a field on fire along the horse trail at around 7:30 p.m.

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 Oakland County Sheriff's Department deputy on patrol.

More sheriff's department and Milford Police Department patrol cars eventually arrived on the scene, along with the sheriff's department Fire Investigation Unit.

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.

"Fortunately we had a day of snow earlier and when the snow melted, the ground was not as dry, which helped put out the fires," said Milford Police Lt. Tom Callahan.

Atkinson was taken to Providence Hospital in Novi and was treated for minor injuries.

He was arraigned in 52-1 District Court on Sunday, April 12. The suspect had previously received a misdemeanor drunk driving conviction in 2007.

Atkinson is also a person of interest in a fire that occurred in the lower level of the University of Michigan's West Quad dormitory in the early morning hours of March 26. That fire was put out by the building's sprinkler system and was ruled an arson by university officials. There were no injuries and the fire caused minor damage to the hallway carpet and a room door.

Diane Brown, public information officer for the University of Michigan Department of Public Safety, said the

department has a video image of someone entering the building shortly before the fire started, as well as a rendering of a suspect.

"My understanding is that there is a similarity but we have not gotten enough evidence to say he is a suspect, but he is a person of interest," Brown said.