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BLAST ZONE

Natural gas explosion destroys downtown buildings, one woman missing

From the Collected Coverage: Explosion rocks downtown Bozeman series

By JODI HAUSEN Chronicle Staff Writer Mar 5, 2009



PHOTO COURTESY OF JONATHAN MOSES A firefighter stands at the scene moments after an explosion rocked downtown Bozeman Thursday.

unknown

One woman is missing after a natural-gas explosion on East Main Street shook downtown Bozeman Thursday morning, leaving several historic buildings demolished.

No other casualties or injuries were reported, although local historians said the destruction was the largest from a single incident in Bozeman in a century.

The explosion was still under investigation late Thursday, and authorities speculated it would be days before they would be able to pinpoint a cause.

“My heart goes out to the missing person and their family,” Bozeman Mayor Kaaren Jacobson said Thursday night. “We need to divert our thoughts and prayers toward them and also to the property owners who have suffered a tremendous loss today.”

The explosion was felt by people miles away. Downtown, it shattered windows, spewed debris for several blocks and sparked a fire that damaged neighboring buildings.

“It literally looks like a bomb went off,” assistant city manager Chuck Winn said at one of several press conferences held throughout the day.

“This was a very serious explosion. It is the worst catastrophe I’ve ever seen in Bozeman,” added Winn, who is also the former fire chief and a 24-year veteran of the Bozeman Fire Department.

On Thursday night, Winn said that although the fire was under control, it was still burning and conditions were too hazardous to begin searching the rubble for the missing woman. Authorities did not release her name.

“We have exhausted all resources to ascertain that she’s not in there,” Winn said.

The explosion at 8:12 a.m. destroyed several businesses on the 200 block of East Main Street between North Bozeman and North Rouse avenues.

Officials said it was too early to accurately estimate the cost to repair the damage, although that figure will certainly be in the millions.

Boodles, Montana Trails Gallery and LillyLu were flattened. The explosion and fire also caused significant damage to the Rocking R Bar, Pickle Barrel and the American Legion Hall.

Immediately after the blast, an 8-foot-high pile of wood, glass and wreckage spilled onto the sidewalk and into Main Street from a gaping hole where Boodles formerly stood. Storefronts along the street, including many on the National Register of Historic Places, were windowless and glass was scattered on sidewalks as far as three blocks away.

An inconsolable Jalal Neishabouri stood on the corner of Bozeman Avenue and Mendenhall Street, a half-block away from his Rocky Mountain Rug Gallery, and watched as flames and black smoke leapt 100 feet over the buildings next door to his shop.

He had been in the gallery when the blast ripped out windows and buckled the wood floor a few feet from him. The concussion tossed him backwards, he said.

“My whole life,” he said through tears as he gripped his forehead. “I’m so glad I wasn’t in my office because I would have been dead. I’m really lucky I went for a cup of coffee.”

Boodles owner Jackson Kent stood nearby, too. He was at his girlfriend’s house near the Blue Basket on North 19th Avenue when his upscale bar and restaurant went up in flames. He said he felt the concussion of the blast from miles away.

Firefighters from Bozeman and as far away as Big Sky and Three Forks pumped 1,000 gallons of water per minute on the blaze. In the end, they were able to keep the fire from spreading to Neishabouri’s store to the west, and Starky’s Authentic Delicatessen to the east.

But the fire still burned into the night as NorthWestern Energy crews worked to shut off the gas feed. Firefighters kept the flames at bay but did not completely douse them to prevent leaking gas from accumulating and causing another explosion.

“It may look chaotic, but it’s going well,” Winn said earlier in the day.

Authorities evacuated students and staff from Hawthorne Elementary School on Rouse Avenue around 12:45 p.m., taking them to the Bozeman Public Library two blocks away to avoid smoke that began blowing when winds shifted.

Hawthorne is expected to open as usual today, Bozeman Schools Superintendent Kirk Miller said in a prepared statement Thursday.

Gov. Brian Schweitzer and Montana Department of Transportation Director Jim Lynch flew from Helena Thursday morning to lend support.

“We understand this is not going to be over in 24 hours,” Schweitzer said. “Downtown Bozeman is the jewel of this community. We understand you’re going to need help.”

There will be security issues for at least another week, he continued, standing beside representatives from the Montana National Guard.

Bozeman Police Chief Mark Tymrak said Thursday evening that he had decided to use the National Guard to help with security.

Although city crews were busy boarding up many compromised buildings all day, “there are many businesses that are not secure,” Tymrak said.

State Sen. Larry Jent, D-Bozeman, and state Rep. JP Pomnichowski, D-Bozeman, also returned home from the legislative session in Helena to assess the damage and lend whatever help they could. They said they felt they needed to be here for their constituents.

“My city comes first,” Pomnichowski said. “It’s not just what’s happened to one business, it’s what’s happened to our city.”

Luckily, Winn said, the early 1900s-era buildings were constructed when fire was more prevalent and the masonry walls between the structures act as fire breaks, which may have been instrumental in helping to contain the blaze.

“Considering the incident, we’ve been very, very fortunate,” he said. “For a lot of reasons, we’re very lucky this didn’t happen later in the day,” when more people would have been at work in the area.

Countless area businesses and individuals not affected by the disaster piled food, coffee and pallets of water and energy drinks in the city hall lobby as officials, media and the public scurried in and out.

“Everybody wants to be very helpful,” Winn said. “That’s a Bozeman trait - a typical Bozeman response.”

“The spirit of Bozeman is strong,” Mayor Jacobson said. “We will pull together and get through this.”

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