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Morning blaze damages Somers Point landmark

From Press staff reports

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From Press staff reportsSOMERS POINT — An early-morning, four-alarm fire did major damage to the Anchorage Tavern, one of Bay Avenue's oldest landmarks, shutting the business down at least temporarily and turning the popular draw into a tourist attraction of a whole different kind Monday.

More than 60 firefighters battled a blaze that started shortly before 5 a.m. and was apparently caused by an electrical problem near a restroom, a city fire official said. But the fire spread quickly to the second and third floors along the Delaware Avenue side of the historic building and did its worst destruction there, largely sparing the first-floor kitchen, dining room and bar area, said Assistant Chief Michael C. Sweeney of Somers Point Fire Co. 2.

Sweeney had no estimate on how much it would cost to repair the place but said "it's not a teardown. They'll definitely be able to work with what they have."

The owners, Don Mahoney and his wife, Michelle, wouldn't make any public statements about the fire or the future Monday, she said. But they expect to release some information later this week, she added.

Still, the fire chief and several neighbors said they expect that Don Mahoney — who is known for putting in long days in the business he bought in 2000 after leasing out its kitchen — would move quickly to get the Anchorage moving again.

"I'll tell you, they're not going to sit on their hands," Sweeney said.

And Ron DeFelice, who was awakened by the smell of smoke pouring into his home across Delaware Avenue from the Anchorage, also predicted that a bar that has been in business since at least 1874 — or 1860, by some accounts — will be dishing out food and drink again soon.

"He's the kind of guy who's there from early in the morning to late at night," said DeFelice, the Anchorage's next-door neighbor for 25 years. "So knowing him, that's what they'll do."

He saw confirmation of that opinion from the work that he — and hundreds of people who passed the historic tavern slowly Monday, studying the fire damage on four wheels or two legs — already saw going on to the building. As water dripped off the roof, work crews already had most of the windows on the upper floors boarded up by early afternoon.

"That's remarkable, what they've done already," DeFelice said.

Still, Pat Pierson, who has run Bayshore II Restaurant across Bay Avenue for 20 years, worries about the staff of 70 or so Anchorage employees.

"That's the human side to this story," Pierson said. "This is more than just a fire."

Pierson, who goes in to open her place at about 5 a.m., said fire trucks blocked Bay Avenue for

most of the morning, and she stayed busy giving out coffee to firefighters who came from as far away as Longport, Absecon, Pleasantville and Egg Harbor Township, according to Sweeney.

“But the regulars still found their way in for breakfast,” Pierson added.

Anchorage regulars and old-timers remember a place that grew famous in the 1960s and '70s for offering seven beers for a dollar “ a Somers Point selling point in those days ” and that also grew dingy and hit hard times by the '80s. But a group of previous owners did major renovations to the restaurant by the early '90s, and by the time Don Mahoney took over the kitchen as chef in 1996, it may have been as popular for what it dished out on plates as its liquid product line.

When Mahoney bought the whole building in 2000, he told interviewers he knew he wasn't just buying a bar and restaurant.

“I purchased a hunk of history,” he said.

And Sweeney, the fire chief, said his volunteer crews did their best to save that hunk of history “ despite the fact that flames were pouring out of the second floor by the time they got there in the whipping winds of the pre-dawn darkness to handle a fire in a wood-sided, 130-year-old building. He said the Anchorage's bar area itself suffered some serious water damage, but the “ dining room and kitchen are all OK.”

There was one minor injury, when firefighter Tom Reed fell through a damaged floor, but Reed credited his colleagues, Capt. Jim Somers and firefighters Mike Wallace and Justin Meals, with saving him. He was carried out on a stretcher as a precaution, but his injuries were minor enough that he could go back to the Anchorage before firefighters left in late morning and back to the firehouse for another call early in the afternoon.

With his volunteer safe, Sweeney said he was “ satisfied ... the guys could keep it contained where they did.”

To Anchorage neighbor DeFelice, whose home and catering business are a few decades younger than the bar next door, that work is also cause for congratulations.

“A lot of these buildings are old, and the timber inside, it's dry,” he said. “ Nobody really got hurt, the Fire Department got here quickly “ I think this could've been a lot worse.”

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Print Page

Close Window