



MEDIA RELEASE

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RE: Fire destroys major portion of century-old downtown Amherst building

AMHERST, Nova Scotia – Fire overnight Saturday, Sept. 19, 2020, destroyed much of a century-old building in downtown Amherst that contained two businesses, despite the efforts of 105 firefighters from seven different departments.

"The call came in shortly after 10:30 p.m.," Fire Chief Greg Jones said, during an 8 a.m. interview Sunday morning, Sept. 20, 2020.

"When we arrived on the scene, smoke was starting to come out of the eaves of the structure and from the doors on the lower level."

Initially, the department sent a crew inside the structure to battle the fire in the U-shaped building that takes up a major portion of a block



An Amherst firefighter pours water onto a fire that destroyed a major portion of a downtown Amherst building overnight Saturday. (Tom McCoag / Town of Amherst)



bounded by Crescent Avenue, Douglas Avenue, Abbot Street and Station Street.

"We sent the crew in to see if we could make an aggressive attack on it," Jones said. "Unfortunately, the fire had progressed to a point where that was not possible because the fire had started rolling inside the building. We could see it happening through the windows."

As a result, the crew was pulled out and "we proceeded with a defensive attack," the chief added.

Flames shot 20 metres into the air lit the night sky from the building that housed

Easy Storage and a second business operated by James Austin. Dense smoke that rose several more metres into the sky could be seen from several blocks away.

Three aerial trucks, from Amherst, Springhill and Sackville, N.B., poured thousands of litres of water on the structure from three different sides of the building. Crews manning the 10 other pieces of apparatus also poured water into the structure from all sides of the building.

It seemed the raging fire ate the water that was poured into it. At times, mini explosions could be heard coming from the building as roaring flames shot out several metres from windows and doors.

Firefighters also had to be cautious as the roof and walls of the structure began collapsing. At one point, the Amherst department had just moved its aerial ladder, located at the back of the building, when a wall collapsed.

"We've had great support from our mutual aid partners in battling the fire," Jones said, noting that Amherst firefighters received aid from the Sackville, N.B., Springhill, Leicester, Pointe du Bute. N.B, River Hebert and Trumanville fire departments. EHS paramedics were also on standby and Nova Scotia Power crew shut off electricity to the area.

The support was evidenced as firefighters took turns handling the hoses. You often saw firefighters from different departments working together to get water onto the fire.



Sackville, N.B., firefighters pour water from their aerial truck onto a fire that destroyed much of a downtown Amherst building. (Tom McCoag / Town of Amherst)



Firefighters also spent a great deal of effort pouring water onto a part of the building where there was an internal firewall. Their efforts worked as they prevented the fire from reaching the bottom of the U and the other side of the structure.

Between midnight and 1 a.m., the chief contemplated ordering an evacuation of nearby buildings, but one was not ordered because of changing conditions.

“We did do a notice walk in which we advised people that if they had to get out of their homes, they could call the Red Cross for assistance,” Jones said. “Those that did leave on their own found their own housing for the night.”



Amherst firefighters pour water onto a fire that destroyed much of a downtown Amherst building. (Tom McCoag / Town of Amherst)

At about 3 a.m., an excavator was brought in to bring down walls and to make access to the flames easier for the firefighters. It was still on the scene at 8 a.m., moving debris to get at the flames, which were still burning. Smoke could still be seen billowing high into the air and the downtown smelled like smoke.

“The biggest issue we had in fighting this fire was its type of construction,” Jones said. “Its old timber construction caused us more work to get at the fire. That’s why we brought in the excavator. It opened the building up a bit. We’re now getting better access to the fire.”

Several downtown streets were blocked off as firefighters battled the blaze. The chief expected those closures to continue for most of Sunday as he expected the firefighters would be “on the scene for most of the day.”

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