

Broken Bow businesses hope to reopen quickly

By Mark Coddington

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April 4, 2007

BROKEN BOW -- Less than 48 hours after a fire destroyed five Broken Bow businesses, three of them had plans on Tuesday to reopen by the end of the week.

Doug Campbell, president of the Broken Bow Economic Development Corp., said he hopes to have American Family Insurance, Lyne's Appliance and Square One back in business in temporary spaces by Friday.

Campbell said he is also close to an agreement that would provide temporary space for Chapin's Furniture & Decor.

"Usually out of adversity comes a lot of creativity and initiative," said Campbell, who is helping to coordinate the business recovery effort. "And that's already beginning to happen."

Those four businesses, along with the Photo Center, were destroyed in a fire Sunday evening on the south side of Broken Bow's downtown square. A sixth business, Lyne's Antiques, also had items in storage destroyed.

Campbell said the response to his call for help for the damaged businesses has been remarkably swift.

Since an initial meeting Monday morning and an announcement on local radio, Campbell said, he has been deluged with offers of warehouse space, office space, computers, furniture and moving help for affected business owners.

"The phone calls have been coming in at an unbelievable rate," he said. "People are offering anything and everything."

Campbell said the city is short of prime, vacant office space, so his office and the city council have had to cast a wide net for usable space.

Lola Chapin, who owns Square One and Chapin's Furniture & Decor with her husband, Gene, said on Tuesday that she hoped to reopen Square One in a temporary office by the end of the afternoon.

The inventory for Square One, a clothing store, was destroyed, but Chapin said she has some outstanding tuxedo rental orders for this weekend that she needs to fill.

"We have people who have ordered tuxes, and we can't let our customers down," she said.

Chapin said she and her husband are working feverishly to contact suppliers and customers in order to get their businesses back on their feet.

Matt Lyne, who owns Lyne's Appliance, said he's found a temporary space and a desk and expects to receive a computer in order to reopen within the next several days.

He continues to get daily shipments from suppliers and had been scheduled to deliver about 20 appliances this week.

Both Lyne and Chapin said that, after the shock of the fire sunk in, they never gave a second thought to attempting to recover as quickly as possible. It's simply a matter of small-business survival, they said.

“I told my wife (the night of the fire), ‘We’ve got a heck of a lot of people counting on us, so we’ve got to do something,’” Lyne said.

Meanwhile, the city began dismantling the most precarious sections of the building piece by piece Monday evening in an effort to make the building safe for fire inspectors, said Deb McCaslin, the city's public information officer.

A crane is being used to bring down the building's walls, starting at the top, which is most susceptible to a collapse, she said.

McCaslin said it will be at least two to five days before investigators can determine a cause, though she emphasized that it may not be possible to determine one at all.

Firefighters continued to fight flare-ups on Tuesday, but few of the 165 firefighters who initially responded remained at the scene.

Broken Bow schools reopened on Tuesday, and officials continued to narrow the fire's restricted area, allowing parking in downtown Broken Bow on Tuesday. Highway 2, which runs past the fire scene, is expected to be closed until at least the end of the week, McCaslin said.

The building, known as the Dierks Block, was built in 1889 and was added to the National Register of Historic Places along with much of downtown Broken Bow in December.

Broken Bow recovery moves forward

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April 7, 2007

BROKEN BOW — With a cause determined and hot spots eliminated, recovery from Sunday's fire in downtown Broken Bow moved into a new phase Friday.

Responsibility for the building was turned over to business owners Thursday night as county-run demolition stopped and firefighters ceased monitoring the site continuously, said Deb McCaslin, Broken Bow's public information officer.

Officials from the state Department of Environmental Quality will meet with business owners next week to review demolition regulations and options, she said.

“It's not just a matter of coming in with a dump truck and a front loader and hauling it all away,” said McCaslin, adding that rubble must be sorted before it's disposed of.

Government officials led the push to dismantle much of the building's walls earlier this week in

order to make the building safe for investigators to determine the fire's cause.

The fire began when a hanging lamp fell and ignited sawdust and cardboard on the basement floor of the Photo Center, said Dell Cerny, the state fire marshal's lead investigator into the fire, on Friday.

The fire has been ruled an accident.

Cerny said the fire probably began early Sunday afternoon, burning without smoke several hours before it was reported just before 6 p.m. When firefighters arrived, the fire had already burned a hole through the basement floor.

The fire then destroyed six businesses by spreading through an old, unused heating system that ran throughout the building, which was built in 1890.

"Once you got a fire in there, it really had a chimney where it could just go up," Cerny said at a public forum Friday afternoon.

Firefighters finished dousing hot spots Thursday but remained at the site for another 12 hours before reducing their duty to occasional checks, McCaslin said.

Highway 2, which runs past the building on the south side of Broken Bow's downtown square, was reopened to traffic Thursday afternoon. By Friday afternoon, traffic was flowing through every downtown intersection, including Eighth and Ninth streets' intersection with the highway.

The business owners themselves were well on their way toward recovery as well. Four of the damaged businesses — Square One, American Family Insurance, Lyne's Appliance and Chapin's Furniture & Decor — reopened in temporary spaces elsewhere in town this week.

Doug Campbell, president of the Broken Bow Economic Development Corp., said his organization has begun looking for ways to allow businesses to build new permanent locations.

He pointed out several potential options: The local industrial development corporation has 25 acres on the town's east side previously set aside for development, and an economic development board member owns 15 acres on the west side of town, already connected to utilities, for the same purpose.

"We can move really quickly as soon as we know what the business owners' needs are," Campbell said.

Preliminary plans for rebuilding the square's south side are being discussed, he said. He hopes to maintain the square's historical character with a cost-effective project.

Campbell also plans to survey business owners to determine the fire's economic impact on them, though he believes it has been minimal.

Cerny and John Falgione, the state fire marshal, offered to talk with owners of downtown businesses about fireproofing their buildings, which they said are just as vulnerable as the one that was destroyed last weekend.

"If we had another fire in any of those buildings on the square, the same thing could happen,"

Cerny said. “There’s only one person that actually knows their building, and that’s the people who are in it.”

Custer County Emergency Manager George Rhodes said the fire would likely qualify for state assistance through the Governor’s Emergency Fund.

Once the fire’s costs are tabulated, they are sent to the state, which typically reimburses about half the costs beyond its mandated threshold, he said.

Rhodes marveled at the cooperation among private, city, county and state officials in the fire’s aftermath, echoing an often-heard theme around Broken Bow this week.

“You have no idea how well it went here,” Rhodes told the audience at the public forum, “because everybody worked together.”