

Broken Bow fire highlights vulnerability in other small towns

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April 21, 2007

If the rubble remaining from a destroyed building on Broken Bow's downtown square wasn't enough of a reminder, the state fire marshal's office had a sober message for the city's business owners last week.

"The same thing could happen at any one of these other downtown buildings," said Dell Cerny, the lead investigator into the fire, said at a public forum.

That message could go for virtually every other downtown district in the state, with their century-old buildings pockmarked with dozens of structural changes, many of which are unknown to the local fire department.

Those problems are exacerbated in small towns, where volunteer fire departments often don't have time to give regular inspections and there are no city building departments to keep track of many of owners' alterations.

But with major fires to the downtown business districts in York, Hastings and Broken Bow within the last six months, both fire departments and business owners are beginning to work harder on making sure those businesses are safe.

The Broken Bow Fire Department has been deluged with calls from business owners about what they can do to make their buildings safer, said fire chief Kem Oatman. Plans are in the works for an informational meeting for businesses through the town's Chamber of Commerce.

In the Wood River Volunteer Fire Department, Broken Bow's fire spurred a discussion about how vulnerable its downtown buildings are — and how long it's been since the department thoroughly inspected them.

"Unfortunately, we're probably not as prepared as we should be," said Wood River fire chief Todd King.

Many firefighters have lived in town long enough to have a cursory knowledge of most downtown buildings, but it's been years, even decades, since they've had in-depth pre-planning tours through many of them, King said.

During that time, most buildings have undergone a litany of changes — holes cut in firewalls, heating ducts opened up, wiring replaced — that can leave them one errant match away from destruction.

"Any of your small-town downtowns, they're all the same," King said. "It's absolutely a nightmare."

Getting a half-dozen volunteer firefighters and a business owner together for a walk-through has always been a difficult scheduling task, but with more mandatory training eating up firefighters' time, it's not getting any easier.

And while most downtown buildings are nowhere near meeting fire code, fire departments lack the authority to mandate changes. Even suggesting changes can be difficult when many volunteer firefighters are business owners or employees themselves.

“It’s kind of tough for some of us business owners to try to tell other business owners how to run their businesses,” said Aurora fire chief Tom Cox.

The cost of significant changes, like retrofitting a sprinkler system or filling a unused heating duct, also makes many business owners reluctant to undertake them.

But the recent fires are beginning to show business owners that going without fire safety measures is extremely risky, said J.L. Schmidt, director of the Nebraska Lied Main Street Program, which helps small towns renovate their downtown areas.

“There’s a tremendous increase in awareness ... especially now, after Broken Bow,” Schmidt said.

Schmidt had his own wake-up call after the fire that destroyed three York businesses last October. Now, he said, it comes up in virtually every presentation he gives.

Many business owners don’t realize that their buildings are so fire-prone and are often unable to pay for the necessary changes, he said.

There are currently no government-backed financial incentives in Nebraska for fire code improvements. Even the often-used community development block grants cannot be used for such changes.

So Schmidt is hoping to work with legislators and the state fire marshal’s office to offer grants and authoritative information on necessary changes for business owners.

Chuck Hoffman, a deputy state fire marshal and chief of the Grand Island Rural Fire Department, said many business owners don’t realize that it’s far more cost-effective in the long run to invest in fire prevention and safety than to risk rebuilding after a fire.

He is able to mandate changes as a fire marshal, but his office only inspects businesses licensed by the state, like bars, nursing homes and preschools.

The fire marshal’s office’s manpower is stretched to the limit with those state-mandated inspections even though they don’t cover many buildings, he said.

Instead, he said, ground zero in fire safety lies with business owners, who he said need to take stock of their buildings and ask their fire department if they’re not sure what’s at risk in case of a fire.

“Fire prevention doesn’t just start with the fire department coming around and doing an inspection,” Hoffman said. “It starts with the owner.”