

Fire ravages historic building in Palouse

The Brick Wall Bar & Grill in Palouse consumed in Tuesday morning blaze

Bill McKee/Moscow-Pullman Daily News

An early morning fire destroyed a building in historic downtown Palouse on Tuesday just hours after a new bar and grill opened at the location.

The Palouse Fire Department responded to a report of smoke coming from the Brick Wall Bar & Grill, formerly the Palouse Tavern, on the corner of East Main and North Beach streets at about 3:50 a.m.

"When we arrived there was heavy smoke coming from the second story of the building," said Palouse Fire Chief Mike Bagott. "There was an initial attempt to access the second floor via an internal stairway, but they experienced high heat and heavy smoke and decided to pull back."

Firefighters immediately began spraying water through one of the upper story windows, but Bagott said there were flames visible on the roof within 10 minutes of their arrival, at which time all their efforts were directed toward keeping the flames from spreading to other buildings.

Crews from Pullman, Colfax and Fire Districts 4 and 12 were all called to the scene to help with the effort. Bagott said Pullman's tower ladder truck was likely critical in keeping the fire in place, as well as Colfax's ladder truck.

No one was in the building at the time of the fire, and no one was injured while fighting the fire.

Bagott said efforts had already been made to clear some of the structures at the other end of the block so they could be reoccupied. While there were no apparent signs of damage, he said it would likely be some time before a sufficient structural assessment would be complete to clear for re-entry to the building immediately adjacent to where the fire took place, a photography business, Studio 161.

Having purchased the building last September, Adam Barron said he's spent the past several months working on renovations to prepare for the grand opening of his new bar and grill Monday night, just hours before the fire began.

"It's pretty tragic. Hopefully the insurance will cover things so we can rebuild," he said.

While Palouse Mayor Michael Echanove said he was saddened to see the destruction of a building with so much history - he estimates its construction circa 1890 - he expressed gratitude for the quick response by the fire teams which were able to contain the blaze before it consumed buildings nearby.

"They really saved the whole block. They went in and checked in the buildings, made sure everyone was out. The really important thing is no one was hurt," he said.

In the midst of the destruction, members of the community rallied to support the firefighters and their effort, handing out water and sandwiches.

It's part of what makes their community so strong, said Palouse resident Virginia Baldwin. She said some were already working to get food and coffee prepared in the community center within about an hour of the fire departments' initial response.

"That's one of the good things about small towns, they know how to come together. It's something that Palouse does well," she said.

The cause of the fire is still unknown, Bagott said, though an initial assessment, based upon what firefighters saw when they arrived and interviews with witnesses, is that it was likely electrical in nature and began on the second floor.

As the Palouse Fire Department doesn't have a fire investigator of its own, it will be relying on outside agencies - the Pullman Fire Department, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and the insurance carrier for the building - to conduct the investigation.

Bagott didn't have an estimate of the total damage, but he said the building will be considered a complete loss.

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