

'We will be strong again'

Downtown merchants cope with fire's aftermath

By Karen Tolkinen and Celeste Edenloff

As clouds of smoke drifted through downtown Alexandria Tuesday morning, business owners found themselves reeling from the early-morning blaze.

Not only were four buildings destroyed, but many other businesses were impacted. Some had recently received shipments of spring apparel or other retail goods that were now at risk of smoke damage.

"Smoke just filters into everything," said Pam Botker, owner of Creative Touch Boutique and president of the Alexandria Downtown Merchants Association.

Her shop is one block north of the fire. It was less smoky Wednesday than Tuesday, but it was still strong enough to give her a headache, and they were facing the possibility of having to gut the store. It remained closed Wednesday until further notice.

"We'll know more when we talk with the insurance adjuster," Botker said.

Some businesses – like Cowing Robards, which was adjacent to the fire – closed their doors Tuesday while firefighters battled the blaze.

Dan Rooney, owner of Cowing Robards, said there was heavy smoke going on and they needed to vent everything out. Structurally, however, the business was OK, he said, noting that the building was checked over by several people who knew what they were doing.

"Our walls got warm, but our walls are good," he said. "Storewise, we are OK. We will go on."

There were moments Tuesday morning, however, where Rooney worried it was going to be the end of his business.

"I thought, 'Oh my God, this is it.' And it was it



An archway and statues stand frozen in time at the back entrance to Charlie's Bazaar after firefighters douse a large fire that took down four downtown buildings Tuesday, Feb. 25.

for some of them," said Rooney. "We stood next to each other. We're good friends. When it's somebody you know, it changes the score. It's sad."

Six tenants lived above Cowing Robards and the Red Cross is helping them out, said Rooney.

Some businesses, like Bon Jo's, set fans in their doorways to try and keep smoke from damaging their racks of women's apparel.

At Faction Boardshop, a block south of the fire, manager Ben Olson stood at the front door, trying to decide whether to stay open. Known for snowboards, skateboards and other recreational boards, it also sells clothing and shoes, which could absorb the smoke. Next door, Trend & Couture had posted a sign saying it was closed for the day.

"I guess I really don't know right now," Olson said. "It's kind of overwhelming."

Jackie Ellingson of Jackie J's Formal Wear took to Facebook Live to reassure her customers that their gowns were taken care of.

"Everything is safe. All customer gowns were taken out and brought to a secure and locked facility, free of smoke smell. Our customer gowns are 100% safe," she said in her video.

Ellingson also said that their hearts go out to all the businesses that were lost and to all the firefighters and everyone else on the scene fighting the blaze.

"Our store is 100% safe. It is a brick fortress," she said.

Alexandria's downtown shopping district is a major draw for visitors as well as residents, and

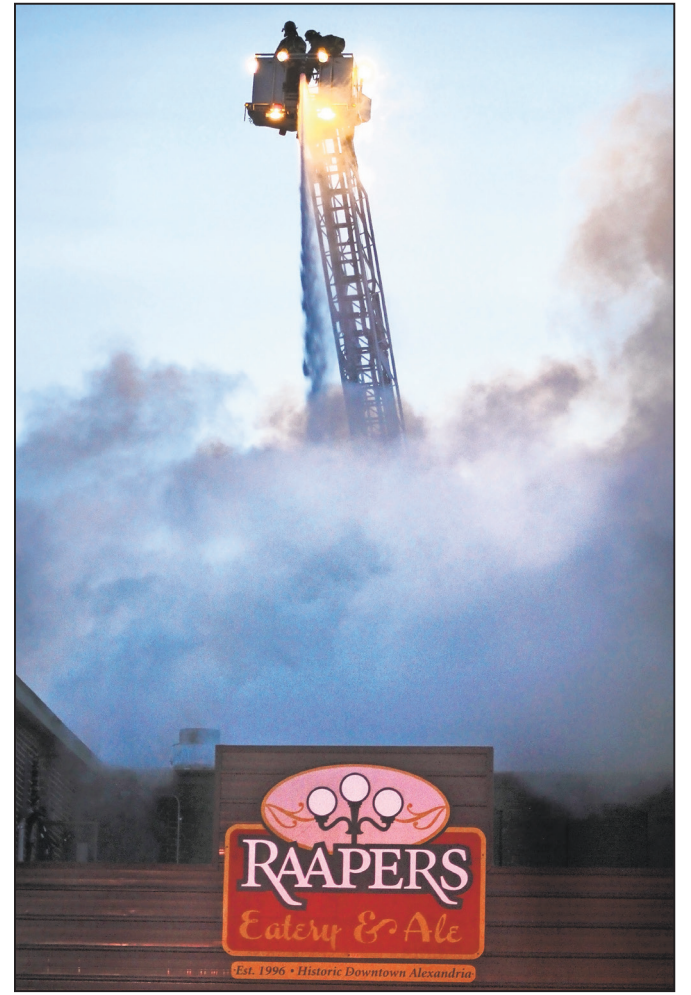
the destruction will force business owners to make tough decisions over the next weeks and months about whether to rebuild and how.

"I think everyone will rebuild, but it's too raw and too new," Botker said.

"We're a strong downtown. We will unite and work together and we will be strong again."

For 21 years, Charlie's Bazaar had sold home decor, clothing, bags and jewelry. It was destroyed Tuesday. Owner Charlie Vernlund said she and business partner Melody Warren had just put on a new roof and painted inside.

Tuesday afternoon found Vernlund at the bank, getting temporary checks because her permanent ones burned in the fire and she needed to pay her workers.



Photos by Celeste Edenloff / Echo Press
Firefighters use a ladder truck to spray water on top of Raapers restaurant in downtown Alexandria Tuesday morning.

"All of us are still in shock," she said. "We had gotten our spring stock in and were so proud of having it all set up. We were thinking that everything was looking awesome and we were excited."

"But God had other plans. Praise God that everybody is safe."

Judy and Gary McNulty of Hidden Treasures Collectibles and Comics, behind RM Tattoos on 5th Avenue W., posted on the business Facebook page that due to the devastating fire, Hidden Treasures is now permanently closed.

Achieve Wellness, another business on 5th Avenue W., behind the tattoo parlor, was not directly impacted by the flames of the fire but endured smoke, water and structural damage.

When Evan Eigen, one of the chiropractors at Achieve Wellness, turned

on his phone Tuesday morning, he was inundated with text messages and voicemails notifying him of the fire. An employee, Britt Duchene, had arrived on scene around 6:45 a.m. to open the doors for the firefighters.

Eigen arrived around 7 a.m. and immediately started hauling items out of the business. He said firefighters let them inside for about five minutes to grab what they could. They took computers, files, hard drives and printers. Firefighters helped them load the items into his truck.

The business was opened at that location in 2016 by Jerod Ochsendorf, with Eigen joining the business in 2018.

Although the business doesn't have a home currently, a post on its Facebook page indicated that it will reopen soon in a new location.

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