



INSIDE
CONNETT
LEADS THE WAY
SPORTS, B1

Alexandria ▶▶

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FOREVER CHANGED



Lowell Anderson / Echo Press

Garfield firefighters watch as water is sprayed from a ladder truck and a backhoe starts tearing down walls during the fire that roared through four downtown buildings Tuesday, Feb. 25.

‘I pounded and pounded’

During early-morning blaze, neighbors spread the alarm

By Karen Tolkkinen
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It was somewhere between 4:30 and 5 a.m., and William Woodard was just about to go to sleep after working the late shift. Tami Johnson was dressed and ready to go to work. Plenty of others were sound asleep in their apartments above downtown Alexandria’s iconic shops when fire broke out early Tuesday morning.

“I heard a noise in the walls and a weird smell and smoke in the apartment,” said Woodard, who works at Douglas Machine and lived directly above Raaper’s Eatery and Ale. “I woke up my roommate and said, ‘Call 911.’”

His roommate, Mike Chezem, said he was dead asleep.

“I jumped out of bed right away,” he said. “I said, ‘Really?’ He said yes. So I called 911.”

Woodard, trying to track down the source of the smoke, said it seemed to be coming from

a small locked utility closet outside his apartment. He took a hammer to the deadbolt and broke into it while Chezem called for help.

Woodard said he saw some small flames inside the closet and dumped bowls of water on them until growing clouds of smoke drove him back.

About two dozen people lived above businesses in that section of Broadway. As smoke spread and neighbors pounded on each other’s doors, firefighters and police officers rushed to evacuate residents and their pets. Stunned residents fled with what they were wearing into the dark, freezing morning, leaving behind car keys, cellphones, eyeglasses, and, in one case, a pair of false teeth.

Woodard grabbed a lined flannel shirt before heading out, but Chezem left only in his pajama bottoms, without any socks.

They joined their neighbors at the Alexandria Fire Hall on Tuesday morning, some tearfully huddled in blankets while they sat at tables, waiting to speak to Red Cross officials. By mid-morning, Chezem sported orange socks.

“Jail socks,” he said. He also wore a donated gray T-shirt.

“We lost everything. Just what we have on, that’s it.”

CARLOS LOPEZ

Fire rips through four downtown buildings

By Celeste Edenloff
and Al Edenloff

Alexandria Fire Chief Jeff Karrow got the page at 4:34 a.m.

After arriving at the corner of Broadway and Fifth Avenue to assess the scene, Karrow immediately knew he had to call in the State Fire Duty Officer because the fire was going to be big, and it was going to be bad.

The blaze ended up tearing through four buildings on the 500 block of Broadway, in the heart of downtown Alexandria. About 20 residents were displaced and the community lost six businesses.

Early on that morning, Tuesday, Feb. 25, Karrow also summoned the State Fire Marshal and State Fire Investigator.

The investigation is continuing and, as of Wednesday evening, Karrow said a cause has yet to

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A large number of downtown businesses were affected by the fire. **A12.**

More photos from an unforgettable day. **A6-A7**

be determined. He said because of the destruction, a cause could possibly not ever be known.

The fire was originally believed to have originated in or near the Raapers building, but Karrow said at this time he cannot say for sure where it actually started. It will hopefully be figured out after the investigations are done.

FIRE: Page A11



Celeste Edenloff / Echo Press

A fire inspector looks at what remains of one of the buildings torn down after a fire ripped through businesses on the 500 block of Broadway.

STORIES: Page A11

Fire and politics mix at caucuses

By Al Edenloff
and Ross Evavold

Mixed in with the political banter and “Hi, how are you?” greetings at the Douglas County DFL caucus Tuesday night was a heavier topic — a fire that demolished four buildings on Alexandria’s Broadway earlier that day.

Bonnie Bina, chair of the Douglas County DFL, even began the gathering at Discovery Middle School with a moment of silence for the families and six businesses that were affected by the fire. “It was on people’s minds and still is today,” she said Wednesday. “They were wondering what they could do to help.”

The fire was also a topic at

the Republican caucus at Alexandria Area High School. Pastor Mike Bartolomeo of Church for the Harvest in Alexandria referenced the fire in his remarks and again in the invocation he delivered, asking people to pray for all those who were affected by the fire.

DFLers rally around rural issues

More than 100 DFLers attended Tuesday’s caucus — a turnout that pleased Bina, considering there was no presidential preference poll this year; it’s being replaced by the “Super Tuesday” primary on March 3.

“What was really cool is that we had at least one person representing 32 of the 37 precincts

in the county — that’s more than 85 percent,” Bina said. “The fact that they took the time to come out is nice.”

Many of the key resolutions the DFLers talked about Tuesday were related to rural issues, such as supporting small and medium-sized farms and giving farmers the support they need, Bina said.

Another top issue is providing good health care for low-income families and farmers, Bina said.

“Many farmers are struggling with depression and can’t afford health care,” she said. “It’s really tough. We’ve lost people to suicide because of depression.”

CAUCUSES: Page A10



Ross Evavold / Echo Press

Convener Tom Marthaler helps Kathy and Harold Withers of Osakis during a small group session at the Republican caucus Tuesday night at Alexandria Area High School.

