

City Florist Storage Burns



Chuck Hubbard Firemen extinguish a blaze in the basement of the Wilkes Chamber of Commerce Wednesday night. The fire was in an area used by City Florist for storage. The chamber offices were heavily damaged by smoke.

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The basement area of the Wilkes Chamber of Commerce building, being used as a storage space by City Florist, was heavily damaged by fire early Wednesday night. The Chamber's offices on the top floor sustained smoke damage.

Linda Cheek, president of the Chamber of Commerce, was working late when she began smelling and seeing smoke, North Wilkesboro Fire Chief Niki Hamby said. Hamby was just a couple of blocks away and was on the scene in a couple of minutes.

The fire was reported around 5:40 p.m., he said.

A search by Hamby showed smoke was coming into the office from below at the rear of the building. Other North Wilkesboro firemen located the blaze in the basement area.

A basement door adjacent to the alley below was opened and a large hole was cut in paneling to allow firemen complete access, Hamby said. The blaze was quickly put out.

The fire burned into the ceiling above a small bathroom and spread to paneling. Sheetrock kept the blaze from quickly spreading into the rest of the building, Hamby said. He also said that if Ms. Cheek hadn't been there to discover the fire, the entire building might have been burned.

The fire started in a wall adjacent to the basement storage area, burning through a wall and into the bathroom, Hamby said. It appeared that the blaze was caused by an electric drop cord, which was connected to an electrical outlet.

Firemen used a thermal imaging device to find the heart of the blaze and quickly put it out, he explained. Efforts to clear heavy smoke out of the Chamber's offices were begun immediately.

Wedding equipment, plastic floral arrangement items and silk ribbon stored there by City Florist were destroyed in the fire, according to Pat Holbrook, an employee of City Florist. This included candelabras, candle lighters, ornate urns, tall columns used for weddings and other expensive items.

Mrs. Holbrook noted that City Florist has insurance to cover the loss.

Hamby said nearly every member of the North Wilkesboro Fire Department came to the scene. The area around the fire was blocked off by the North Wilkesboro Police Department while the emergency effort was under way. North Wilkesboro Police Chief Joe Rankin was also on the scene.

Hamby said he didn't see any structural damage to the building, but insurance adjusters will make a determination as to the monetary loss.

Ms. Cheek said she was appreciative of the quick response from firemen. "It wasn't 5 minutes before they were here."

The biggest problem for the Chamber is smoke damage and a heavy odor of smoke throughout the building, along with soot in the ceiling ducts, she said. The Chamber's office is still open, though there have been some problems today with the phone lines due to electrical damage.

Power is still cut off to the building's lower level, she said.

Ms. Cheek said it hasn't been determined whether or not the Chamber's offices will be relocated for the time being. She said she will keep members posted on any developments through the media and through e-mail.

A Chamber tourism committee meeting has been moved to the Hampton Inn and will be held Tuesday at noon. A small business committee meeting set for Wednesday will be moved, but a location hasn't been announced. Ms. Cheek said she will contact committee members.