

## **Broken Bow fire devastates downtown**

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**BROKEN BOW** — Lola Chapin received a stream of hugs, encouraging words and offers of help while she gazed at the building that had been her livelihood for 36 years.

“This is all we’ve ever known,” Chapin said on Monday. “It’s that helplessness you feel. There’s just nothing we can do.”

Chapin and her husband, Gene, owned two businesses destroyed when a historic building in downtown Broken Bow went up in flames Sunday night.

The fire brought 13 fire departments to the south side of Broken Bow’s downtown square and left five businesses destroyed by the time it was brought under control early Monday morning.

On Monday, locals shuffled in and out of the square, chatting with exhausted firefighters and business owners and shaking their heads at the damage.

“It’s devastating,” said Denise Russell, executive director of the Broken Bow Chamber of Commerce. “There’s just no other word for it.”

The building, known as the Dierks Block, was built in 1889 and was added to the National Register of Historic Places in December, along with much of downtown Broken Bow, Russell said.

And with the destruction of five businesses — Square One, the Photo Center, American Family Insurance, Lyne’s Appliance and Chapin’s Furniture and Appliance — the fire was a major economic blow to the city, she said.

The fire was reported by a passerby at about 5:30 p.m. Sunday, shortly after both Chapin and Gary Fenton, owner of the Photo Center, had stopped by the building. Neither noticed anything amiss — until they heard about the fire minutes later.

“I thought it was an April Fools’ joke,” said Fenton, who received a phone call saying his business was on fire about a half-hour after he stopped by to pick up some wood pellets.

Soon, the fire moved from the Photo Center to Chapin’s Square One clothing store next door before whipping across the rest of the building.

By Monday, the building was only a hollowed-out shell, with little left behind its brick front. Firefighters continued to spray the building, working on stubborn hot spots.

The building’s interior was believed to be entirely wood, much of it very old, said Deborah McCaslin, the city’s public information officer. But the fire’s cause is not expected to be determined for at least two to five days, if at all.

The city declared an emergency late Sunday night and began meeting every few hours with leaders of the recovery effort, said Mike Evans, city council president.

By Monday afternoon, several potential problems had been averted, McCaslin said.

Businesses and residents had been asked to conserve water Monday morning in a precautionary effort to preserve water pressure, but pressure never became a problem and use was returned to normal, McCaslin said.

Also, power to the block, which includes several other businesses, had been shut off Sunday night. But power was rerouted to all those businesses but one on Monday, she said.

School was canceled on Monday because the city's traffic detour ran past the middle and high schools, McCaslin said. But school was scheduled to reopen today as the fire's restricted area narrowed.

The city's top priority is safety, she said, as no one has been hurt in the fire or its aftermath. It plans to begin slowly deconstructing the building piece by piece tomorrow rather than using a wrecking ball. And detours and yellow tape are expected to be up for at least the rest of the week.

Its second priority is helping the affected business owners and downtown recover. The city, along with the chamber of commerce and the Broken Bow Economic Development Corp., have found office space, computers and furniture for the businesses to use, Evans said.

Evans, who has been acting as mayor while Mayor Reynold "Mac" McMeen is out of town, said he has been amazed at local officials' cooperation over the past 24 hours. He expressed confidence that the city's downtown would recover.

"I knew we had a lot of good leaders who were fully capable of getting all that accomplished, but I've never seen them team up like this before," he said.

Chapin and Fenton both said they're thankful for the support they've gotten toward reviving their businesses, though neither has stopped to ponder the next step.

"Tomorrow I'll think about it," Chapin said. "I just have to get through today."

To donate toward fire relief:  
South Side Fire Relief Fund  
c/o Custer County Foundation  
403 S. Ninth St.  
Broken Bow, NE 68822