

BREAKING NEWS Oakland warehouse fire: Officials release names of 9 more victi

Community News

Menlo Park fire marshal: Deadly Oakland fire unlikely to repeat here



A shed that was illegally converted into a living space is shown as Menlo Park firefighters respond to a fire at a residence on Verbena Drive in East Palo Alto in this undated photo. According to the fire district, the fire was brought under control before it reached the shed. (Menlo Park Fire Protection District)

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A Menlo Park fire official said local cities aren't likely to see a fire of the intensity that killed at least 36 people in Oakland this past weekend.

But Menlo Park Fire Protection District fire marshal Jon Johnston doesn't dismiss the idea out of hand, in part because materials used in building construction in the past 40 years have moved away from organic materials such as wood and cotton to foam plastics, which he equates with gasoline.

"With the amounts of plastics and foam, fires burn hotter and faster than they used to," he said. "I would like to think we have a good enough pulse in the community that we are limiting that risk."

Johnston said people should be aware of their surroundings when entering a building for the first time. Check for fire alarms, fire extinguishers and fire sprinklers and be aware of exits, Johnston said. "Fire sprinklers are the only thing that can do something about the fire and aid people who are fleeing."

Cities in the district's coverage — Menlo Park, East Palo Alto, Atherton and unincorporated areas of San Mateo County — aren't privy to the same type of warehouse conversions that Oakland experiences, he said. For instance, Tarlton Properties, which owns and manages more than 1.5 million square feet of space in Menlo Park, harbors commercial buildings that could potentially and unknowingly be used as living spaces, but Tarlton has full-time oversight of its properties.

"We're not seeing it here," Johnston said. "We've (only) seen small sleeping areas added on to businesses ... in East Palo Alto and the unincorporated county area."

What Johnston does often see is sheds and other structures being illegally converted into housing units that qualify as fire and health hazards. Fire hazards can come from gas-powered water heaters or overused power supplies. Health hazards can come from people living in incomplete, unsafe structures or structures with poor ventilation that allows the growth of harmful molds.

"Our most prolific instance is people doing conversions ... where they take a home and convert every room into a one-bedroom apartment," he said. "We don't go out looking for violations (and) our goal is to not displace people. If it's not visible, we need to get permission to enter ... or (be) something that would be egregious enough to get a search warrant."

Johnston said the district has never had to get a search warrant, and has only red-tagged — or declared uninhabitable — two to four properties over the past year. Code enforcement by cities in its coverage area, he said, has improved in recent years, but cases still pop up from under the radar.

One such case was a recent fire in East Palo Alto where the blaze started in the main residence, but a shed used illegally as a living space caught fire and caused it to spread to another home. In another instance, firefighters were called to a property at which the home and multiple sheds had turned it “into an apartment complex (and) there were no good exits.”

The district’s largest loss of life in recent memory, according to fire Chief Harold Schapelhouman, was from a house fire that occurred in 1997 in East Palo Alto and led to nine deaths, most of them children. According to the San Francisco Chronicle, makeshift bars intended to protect the home from burglars trapped the people inside.

Johnston asked that anyone with fire safety concerns, referrals or questions, contact the district’s Fire Protection Hotline at 650-688-8425.

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Kevin Kelly Kevin Kelly is the reporter covering Menlo Park. He joined The Daily News in 2005 as a copy editor and served as the copy desk chief before the paper was reformed as a weekly.

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