

SBS IN THE NEWS



Blaze Rips Hole in Heart of Norwood Merchant District

By Katie Riordan, Molly Ryan and Jordan Moss.
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A five-alarm fire gutted at least 10 stores and severely damaged four others in the heart of the Bainbridge Avenue merchant district early Saturday morning.

Officials are still trying to determine the cause of the blaze which took 198 firefighters more than five hours to extinguish.

The fire gutted the Bainbridge Bakery for a second time. The owners embarked on a \$300,000 renovation after it was hit by a smaller fire last April, according to the Daily News, and it was just about to reopen this week. But the fire insurance had not yet started.

Hundreds of shocked residents, passersby and local community leaders crowded the sidewalks and streets nearby on Saturday morning to take in the scene which had the appearance of a bomb blast site -- so little was left of the stores except rubble. Many people clutched cell phones to their ears, reporting the news to friends and family.

Several storeowners were among the crowd but could do little except watch the parade of inspectors, investigators, insurance adjusters, firefighters and police as they went about the grim work of assessing the aftermath.

"We had a store before, but now we have

nothing," said Mike Zagh, a Palestinian immigrant and graduate student in business who helped run his brother's candy store at 3085 Bainbridge Ave. "All our investment was in this store," he added.

The Fire Department has not yet ascertained the cause or even where it started, though Kastriot Delias, owner of Nicky's Pizzeria across the street, said it began in the vicinity of Diamante Poblano, a Mexican Restaurant. "They tried to put water [on it], but the fire was so much," he said. "In one hour the fire moved to the end of the block. The buildings are too old."

Storeowners that did have insurance worried nonetheless that it wouldn't be enough to rebuild. "We have insurance but it covers just a little," said Mrs. Park, who owns the Bainbridge Fish Market with her husband, during a walking tour on Monday with State Senator Pedro Espada. "It is not enough to build a new store. I don't know."

The affected area consists of two buildings, one with 10 stores -- 3083 -- 3105 Bainbridge Ave. -- which now must be demolished because its roof collapsed and parapet wall was damaged; and 3109-3119 Bainbridge with four stores which the Buildings Department issued a vacate order to.

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Blaze Rips Hole in Heart of Norwood Merchant District (Continued)

On Monday, even those whose businesses survived were aggravated. "It's a huge business interruption," said Sal Mirra, the owner of Hillside Meat and Deli, which only suffered a little smoke but was still waiting for the electricity to come back on. "They promised they would be here. There is no representative. No one is answering the phones."

The tragedy was compounded for many locals who enjoyed close relationships with storeowners. Mirra heard about the fire from a customer who called him at 3 a.m. on his cell phone.

Mary, a Norwood resident who didn't give her last name, came out on Monday to see how the owner of Betty's Place, where she has her hair done, was doing. "You get used to the people, the service," she said. "No one knows what is going to happen. You grow close to the people who run the stores. It is just terrible."

Mark Grant, a Mosholu Parkway resident worried that the popular mom-and-pop stores would be replaced by chains. "My assumption is big business will push themselves in," he said.

The landlord of the largest building, Evelyn Jacobson, sounded a positive note on a dark day. "The plan is to get the building back up as quickly as possible," she said on Monday during the tour.

"Out of the ashes will come new opportunities and new dreams," said Espada, the state Senate majority leader. "The Bronx knows how to rebuild."

City officials met with merchants just hours after the fire in nearby Holy Nativity Church, which suffered some window damage. The Department of Small Business Services' (SBS) Emergency Response Unit has been helping the stores obtain copies of permits and licenses lost in the fire, and expedite Fire reports needed for insurance claims."

SBS and other agencies will be present at another meeting that Community Board 7 is organizing for affected merchants on Friday morning. For more information, call the Board office at (718) 933-5650.

Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, Jr. issued a statement Monday pledging support from the economic development arm of his office: "My office understands how vital the Bainbridge commercial strip is and remains committed to helping the businesses and the community to rebound from this fire. We have enlisted the support of the Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation (BOEDC) to assist these businesses in their recovery efforts. Businesses seeking assistance should contact the BOEDC at (718) 590-6252.