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JOHN DeMONT: Searching for a pattern to a spate of south-end Halifax blazes

[John DeMont \(jdemont@herald.ca\)](mailto:jdemont@herald.ca) July 25, 2019



Halifax regional firefighters use saws to get through walls while fighting a blaze at a Green Street building in Halifax on Monday.

Wednesday morning a forlorn scene greeted anyone who walked by 5280 Green St., where, if you tried hard, you could still smell remnants of the blaze firefighters had battled in Halifax's south end days before.

Inside, a 30ish man, who would only identify himself as J., sat sipping Tim Hortons coffee.

The lights inside were off.

The interior overflowed with all manner of miscellaneous items, as befitting a building that housed a U-Haul operation, and a business that sells refurbished restaurant and kitchen equipment.

Water, I'm assuming from fire hoses, puddled on the floor.

"It's in the hands of the fire department now," J, who has worked there for two years, said when I asked about the fire, which left no one injured.

He told me that his employer's business had no insurance, and that the building's landlord lived somewhere in Vancouver.

Once, the building contained a Salvation Army store and a Caribbean restaurant. But in recent years it had gotten run down, and become an eyesore according to Dist. 7 Coun. Wayne Mason, who, in an interview Wednesday, called the structure "one of his least favourite leaking roofs in the city."

In recent years the building had been broken into and methodically stripped of copper pipe. Once, some homeless folk had gotten inside and set up residence in the basement storage area, where Monday's fire was thought to have originated.

When I asked if someone like that could have set the fire he waved me off, saying, "that would just be speculation."

That doesn't stop people from talking.

On July 3, a blaze — cause unknown — occurred in a storage room in an apartment building on Victoria Road, probably three blocks from the Green Street fire.

Last October, a tool shed attached to another Victoria Road apartment building caught on fire for some undetermined reason.

That May, around the corner on Inglis Street, 25 people were left homeless after flames, of uncertain origin, engulfed the Knightsbridge heritage complex.

Two months before that — on March 5, 2018 — the outside of a mixed-use residential and commercial building on Victoria Road caught fire, another case of cause unknown.

On Wednesday, Halifax deputy fire chief David Meldrum told me that, other than geography, his investigators have found no evidence linking the four fires together, and that the department "is not pursuing any investigation that implies that they're connected."

The most that Mason, the district's councillor, would say was that "the numbers (of fires) are a concern but not conclusive."

No one seemed very worried either when I asked around the neighbourhood — an eclectic mix of businesses, single-family homes, and old Georgian residences transformed into flats, as well as apartment buildings and high-rises catering to students, new Canadians and lower-income folk.

When I asked if four fires in the same area in such a short time frame was reason to be wary, a young guy in a New Scotland T-shirt, gave me a dismissive look.

"Stuff happens all the time," he said. "It is a crazy world."

A woman I know — who, with her husband owns property in the area — happened to be passing by.

I asked her if the fires in the area were worrisome.

"Not until now," she said, with a laugh.

Spee Babu Nukarapu, who has lived in the area for about a year, was walking up Victoria Street, on the way to catch the bus over to his work in Dartmouth.

"These are working people," he said when I pulled out my notebook. "This is a safe community."

Fires, of course, happen for a whole bunch of reasons, according to Simon Sherry, a psychologist who heads up Dalhousie University's personality research team.

Fluke accidents for one, human carelessness another.

Arsonists, who light fires for financial benefit or because they crave attention, have their own motivations Sherry explained Wednesday.

For some it can be revenge, for others it can just be a part of some wider pattern of criminal behaviour.

On the other hand, pyromaniacs, a far smaller group, suffer from a mental disorder that makes them preoccupied with everything about fire, including fire alarms and those who try to put out blazes.

Some patterns in their behaviour are discernible: the perpetrators tend to be male, of below-average IQ, and, in the case of pyromaniacs, can also suffer from some other kind of mental disorder like depression or schizophrenia that can trigger episodes.

When they strike it is at night — possibly so they can witness their handiwork in its full Technicolor glory — in urban areas, often in the same geographic areas.

Pyromaniacs, research has shown, tend to strike every six weeks or so — seemingly ruling out the possibility of their participation in the elongated string of south-end Halifax fires.

“Over time the frequency and severity (of set fires) tends to increase,” Sherry says.

Here’s to hoping we never find out.