

Man faces 16 charges in grow op arson

Police say accused fled home without calling 911

BY RICHARD CUTHBERTSON, CALGARY HERALD FEBRUARY 25, 2010

A 33-year-old man now charged in connection with the massive fire that ripped through a northwest neighbourhood in December discovered the blaze in the basement marijuana grow op he was allegedly operating -- but fled the scene without calling 911 or alerting his neighbours, say investigators.

This is according to police who charged the suspect on Wednesday with 16 counts of arson by negligence in what is likely one of the largest fires in Western Canada to be caused by a marijuana grow operation.

"Everyone on the street is asleep, so that is extremely dangerous," Calgary police arson unit Det. Scott Sampson said of the suspect's alleged actions during the early morning blaze that destroyed or damaged eight homes.

He added those who run grow ops "are just worried about themselves, they're worried about being caught for a grow operation, and people's lives, neighbours, kids, are left hanging."

The blaze, which caused \$3.8 million in damage, began Dec. 5 shortly before 4 a.m. at a home on Citadel Forest Place. It quickly spread as neighbouring residents fled with little more than the clothes on their backs.

Firefighters fought not only the flames, but high winds, access to fire hydrants and snow that hampered fire trucks. When the blaze was extinguished, five homes were left demolished, with three others damaged. Eleven people were homeless, with four dogs and eight cats killed.

The suspect was renting the home where the fire started, and also faces charges of producing drugs and stealing electricity.

Sampson described how it took investigators almost 10 days "to get into the scene." The scene was covered in tarps and heated to melt the metre of ice in the basement.

"Through that three feet of ice we were actually able to find all the components that were needed for a marijuana grow operation," he said.

Investigators found five "severe" electrical deficiencies, any one of which could have resulted in a fire, Sampson said.

Police busted a grow op at the same home in 2007, when it was under different ownership. The house was subsequently renovated.

One of those who lost their house in the blaze was Kim Stobbe, who escaped with her daughter and parents. She was appalled to learn the arson suspect allegedly fled the scene.

"That's horrible. He obviously doesn't care about other people. That's pretty heartless," said Stobbe, adding she and her family are living in a house rented by the insurance company.

Sampson said grow ops are 20 times as likely to catch fire as a normal residence.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said grow ops use large amounts of power. She wants the province to bring in legislation so power companies are forced to disclose to authorities when a residence is consuming unusually high amounts of electricity.

"It's pretty simple. If these people don't have electricity, and we just turn out the lights, then we can bring organized crime to its knees."

rcuthbertson@theherald. canwest.com

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