

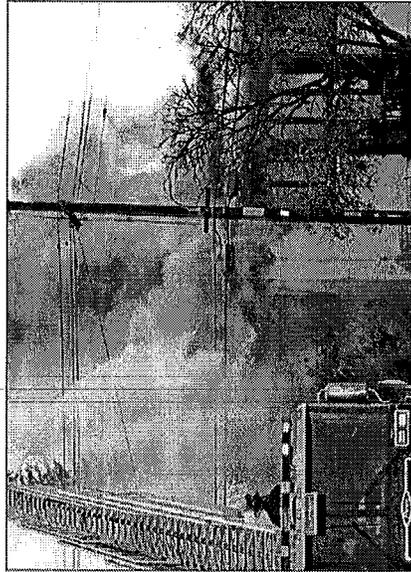
EAST BAY TIMES

FIRE AT HISTORIC LIBRARY BRANCH EAST OAKLAND

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2-alarm blaze:
Fire officials say no immediate reports of injuries
Second time in a year:
Same building was heavily damaged in April

By Harry Harris and Aaron Davis
Staff writers



Oakland firefighters battle a two-alarm fire at a vacant landmark library building on East 15th and Miller streets on Friday.

PHOTOS BY RAY CHAVEZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Oakland firefighters remove a charred piece of the facade as they battle a two-alarm fire at a vacant landmark library building. On April 25, 2017, the same building was heavily damaged by a two-alarm fire.

OAKLAND » A vacant, city-owned Carnegie library building in East Oakland with a history of problems was destroyed in large blaze Friday afternoon, officials said.

The fire erupted about 1:50 p.m. at the 100-year-old, two-story Spanish Colonial Revival style building at 1449 Miller Ave. that has been occupied by squatters over the years, and had been badly damaged in a blaze last spring. Fire officials had searched all but the flooded basement and said there were no immediate reports of injuries.

Flames and heavy smoke were reported and firefighters were told to get out from under power lines in the area near the building.

Councilman Noel Gallo was at the scene, watching the building burn Friday afternoon. "This time it's really burning," he said. "It will burn to the ground."

Gallo said that a Baptist church in West Oakland had recently made a \$300,000 bid to buy the building, which was going to be considered by the City Council in April. A second bid by a Los Angeles-based company, which is developing the senior center across the street, had also been submitted, he said. The building is on the national registry of historic places, Gallo said.

Gallo said he's seen sex workers and drug users use the building. He also said neighbors told him that two groups of people were fighting at the building around 9 a.m. Friday morning and one of the groups may have returned and started the fire. Oakland Battalion Chief Dino Torres said investigators have not determined a cause but said it started inside the building.

"It has been a hazard in the past. We've had homeless people in there and have had fires," Torres said.

Streets in the area were blocked off while firefighters battled the blaze. Smoke from the fire could be seen in Alameda and other parts of Oakland. Residents of a nearby apartment complex were evacuated as a precaution, and around the block, neighbors gathered to watch the efforts of firefighters to quench the blaze at the old, vacant library.

"I've been in there, it's very beautiful inside. Or well, it was beautiful," said neighbor Johnn Mulloch. "It's been abandoned since I was a little kid, though."

Jose Lopez said people have gone there for years to sleep and escape the elements.

On April 25, 2017, the same building was heavily damaged by a two-alarm fire. Crews had to force entry to the boarded up building to battle the flames, and one firefighter was injured in that fire.

A month later, Battalion Chief James Bowron sent an email to then-acting Fire Chief Darin White criticizing the city's Public Works Department for a "laissez-faire approach" to securing the building.

"We expect the citizens and property owners of this city to maintain and take responsibility for their properties. We (the city) need to hold ourselves to the same if not higher expectations," Bowron wrote May 5, 2017.

"Obviously, public works failed us," he said in the email.

The city-owned property had been vacant since the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, but the city was unable to come up with the funds to repair seismic issues at the site, according to Sean Maher, public information officer for the city of Oakland.

After the fire in April 2017, the city contracted debris and asbestos removal at the building and boarded up and fenced off the building. No electric or gas power was on at the site, Maher said.

The previous blaze was believed to have been sparked by squatters cooking. There was another fire two weeks earlier that was also suspected to have been started by squatters but it was quickly extinguished and the damage was not as extensive as the April 25 fire.

After that fire, the city collected \$1.5 million in insurance money that was supposed to be directed toward rehabilitating and refurbishing the building, Gallo said. Instead of using the money to fix the blighted structure, the city decided to try to sell the building under market value and keep the insurance money to compensate themselves for what was considered the market rate of the building.

Gallo said buyers had toured the property and were submitting bids, but all came back saying it would cost \$2 million to \$3 million to rehab the facility. The Baptist Church was willing to work with the city to maintain the historical presence.

"Property interests always seem to back away due to costs and historical requirements," Gallo said. "Now, it changes the conversation. There will be a greater interest among other investors or nonprofits or churches that would be willing to bid on the property. For us that live in the neighborhood, it's certainly a blessing, but it's a sad way to get where we are today."

Gallo said he has received complaints from the police chief and fire chief about the building and hoped the concerns would prompt the city to "correct the blight."

"We empathize with the need for the homeless to find shelter, but we've had firefighters hurt in these multiple incidents and the city needs to secure these dangerous buildings," said Zac Unger, vice president of Oakland's firefighter union. In 2012, activists took over the building, turning it into a community library. Oscar Fuentes said Friday he was one of those involved in that effort.

"The people here wanted it to be a community library, with thousands of books donated ... The city didn't want to support it. All we need was the city to get out of the way or help us but they did everything in their power to block us," he said. Since then, the building has been a "heartache" for the people, he said. "The city let that building fester instead of paying attention to the people in the neighborhood," Fuentes said.

The building at one time housed one of Oakland's first branch libraries after it opened on March 14, 1918. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is also a city landmark.

It was the second of four branch libraries to be built in Oakland with \$140,000 in funds from a Carnegie Foundation grant obtained in 1914 by the Oakland City Librarian Charles Greene.

Over the years, the branch had several names, including the 23rd Avenue branch, the Ina Coolbrith Branch (named in honor of the city's first librarian), the Miller Library and finally, the Latin American Branch.

It closed as a library in the late 1970s because the city had no funds for necessary seismic upgrades. Other groups had used the building but it had been vacant for some time before the 2017 fires. David DeBot contributed to this report.

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— Battalion Chief James Bowron, after a fire in April in the same building