

Norfolk Insider

City of Norfolk, NE

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December 14, 2009

"City Pulls Together"



From the firefighters who worked together to shut the propane valves feeding the fire to the Norfolk streets personnel who set up barricades and helped clear driveways to evacuate people, Thursday's response to a fire emergency was a model of a community working together.

It started about 7:00 am Thursday morning when the report of a propane fire behind Protient, a former milk processing plant at 805 Omaha Avenue came in. Because it was time for a shift change, two shifts were available to immediately help at the site of the fire.

A pipe near a 30,000 gallon propane tank had burst and was sending a fireball of flame back onto the tank that had been filled the previous day. The city's EOC (Emergency Operations Center) was put into place at the fire department headquarters. Faythe Petersen, emergency management coordinator for the city, activated the Local Emergency Operations Plan that defines roles and responsibilities for the emergency team. Mayor Sue Fuchtman, City Administrator Al Roder, Police Chief Bill Mizner and the Norfolk City Council members met at the EOC to attend a briefing by Fire Chief Shane Weidner.

A Command Post was set up at the Arby's restaurant down the street from Protient. An unmanned hose shooting a heavy stream of water was set up and directed at the propane tank to keep it from overheating and exploding. Local media was alerted and city police and firefighters began to go door to door telling residents within a half mile (later changed to a mile) of the plant that they must leave their homes, schools, and businesses immediately. Four ambulances including one from Norfolk Ambulance were used to evacuate non-ambulatory residents. Street crew helped clear driveways so that residents could leave. Later the command station was moved to the Sunset Plaza Mall food court which turned out to be an ideal location with ample parking, easy access, and tables to work on.



The Mayor and Roder remained stationed at the EOC to make contingency plans on what could be a long emergency situation. Mike Caldararo, City of Norfolk Library director, helped answer the flurry of phone calls at the fire station from people with questions about the fire and the evacuation.

Engineering, administration and parks staff at the Norfolk City Auditorium set up tables and chairs and began welcoming what would be 500 evacuees over the course of the day.

Heather Claussen of the Madison County Chapter of the American Red Cross came in to help with food, blankets, diapers and water for the evacuees. A local business brought in extra rugs to help out with the snow and

mud being tracked into the auditorium.

Across town, Randy Hagedorn, executive director of the YMCA, decided to open up that facility for kids and adults who had nowhere to go. About 100 people, mostly children but also a number of senior citizens took advantage of the offer. A few slept on couches. The kids were kept entertained with movies on their big screen and playing in the gym. Hagedorn said they were preparing to put up people for the night if need be.

Other groups around the city started offering their buildings as havens for evacuees including area churches, the Norfolk Middle School and the Salvation Army soup kitchen. Cots were at the ready at the auditorium in case the situation required overnight stays.

Off duty police officers had been called in early on. The records clerk and legal assistant helped the dispatch staff until their off duty members could come in and answer the extra load of calls. Members of the Nebraska State Patrol, the Stanton County Sheriff's Department and the Madison County Sheriff's Department helped reroute traffic from coming in on U.S. Highway 81 and highway 275.

Meanwhile at the scene of the fire, a reconnaissance team of Jim Dooley, Scott Bonsall, and John Reding were sent in closer to get pictures of the exact source of the fire. Wearing protective gear, the three made three different trips to within 150 yards of the fire to zoom in with cameras and show more clearly the valve system under the tank.

Jim McKenzie, information manager for the city, kept the city's website updated with news of what was going on at the site. He was also available for technical questions at the command center in sending and retrieving information from the Internet if needed.

Scott Cordes, Norfolk fire assistant chief, was the "eye in the sky" for the operation. He rode in a state patrol helicopter above the fire that was equipped to take direct shots of the scene and send video and infrared photography to the Command Post.

The team gathered at the center made the decision to take aggressive action at the site of the fire.

At 11:40 a.m. a team of fifteen firefighters made a wall of water in front of Scott Bonsall. Together they marched through the now muddy area around the tank pulling the heavy fire hoses with them. In order to keep the wall of water between them and under the tank where the valves were that needed to be shut off, all of them had to walk with Bonsall to the tank. Two more firefighters manned the engines supply the water. Nearly 2/3 of the fire department's paid staff and one reserve firefighter were included in this part of the operation. They had done it before in training and knew they could do it now when it really counted. A large contingent of the reserve force was also part of the backup team at the fire.



The first valve Bonsall turned was already closed. They backed out, regrouped and went back in to get to the second and third valves that Bonsall was able to close.

All of this was watched live by the people at the command center as the helicopter relayed live video feed to them. After the valves were closed it still took 15 minutes for the remaining gas that was in the pipes to burn out. Then all that was left was the blackened end of a propane tank and the fence around it clogged with ice.

By 12:30 p.m. Chief Weidner was back at the station, gathered in the meeting room with the mayor and the city council filling

them in on the successful operation. News reporters set up ten different microphones at a podium brought into the fire station garage from the city library. At 1:00 pm, the Mayor, Chief Mizner and Chief Weidner appeared in a press conference. In the same time, dozens of firemen were dragging in hoses and air tanks in the adjoining garage. They knew their job and did it well as did many of their fellow citizens in Norfolk who stepped up in an emergency situation.

Some numbers:

- 8 Dogs that were running around the inside of the YMCA that had come with their owners who had been evacuated.
- 178 Affiliated Foods employees who met at the city auditorium to be accounted for.
- 500 People who would eventually come throughout the day at the city auditorium.
- 30,000 Gallons of propane that had been put in the tank the day before the fire.
- 0 Injuries reported throughout the disaster.
- 7 Schools that evacuated their students including Montessori Preschool, Montessori School, Christ Lutheran School, Grant Elementary, Lincoln Elementary, Washington Elementary, Norfolk Junior High.
- 100 Hamburgers provided by a local business to the firemen when they returned to the fire station.
- 25 Kids' meals given to the kids at the YMCA by a local business.
- 3 The temperature at 9:00 am that morning.
- 80 Years - the estimated years of experience between the reconnaissance team of Dooley, Reding and Bonsall.
- 7 Officers who went door to door to inform people that they needed to leave the area.
- 4 Months since the City of Norfolk had a practice hazardous materials drill where even an evacuation was practiced.
- 3 Fire departments from other towns that came to take over any fire calls that may come in while the Norfolk department was concentrating on the fire- The Battle Creek, Hoskins and the Hadar Fire Departments.
- 2 ½ Hours that city maintenance people needed to clean up the auditorium after everyone left..
- 45 Pounds that each fireman had to carry just in the fire apparatus that they were wearing.
- 28 On duty and off duty police personnel who participated in the response to the fire.
- 23,000 The population of Norfolk who were extremely thankful for their city emergency personnel.