

City warned of danger before building burned

Huntington officials
accused of being lax

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HUNTINGTON BEACH — Top city officials were warned months ago that three historic buildings were unsecured and ripe for vandalism but did little about it, both the city's former chief safety inspector and its leading preservationist charged Wednesday.

One of the Bowen buildings,

which preservationists wanted to use for a museum, was destroyed Tuesday in a fire allegedly started by two boys who were able to enter the vacant structure.

City executives, whose City Hall offices are in full view of the buildings, should have seen they were not adequately boarded up, the former inspector and the preservationist said.

Barbara Milkovich, chairwoman of the city's Historic Resources Board, charged that city officials might not have fully enforced applicable safety codes because they

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FROM 1

didn't want the museum built and feared offending the development firm that owns the buildings and wanted to raze them.

Although city executives vigorously denied the allegations, saying steps were taken to ensure the buildings' safety, they conceded that some of the entrances might have been open.

The damage to the complex at Lake Street and Yorktown Avenue might have dashed hopes for a museum commemorating the city's early days as an oil town. What little was left of the most severely burned building was flattened by a bulldozer Wednesday afternoon.

For months, preservationists have battled with the property owner and would-be developer, Pacific Coast Homes, which wants to build six houses on the site.

The firm is a corporate relative of the Huntington Beach Co., a Chevron Corp. subsidiary and one of the city's largest landowners.

An internal city memorandum dated April 12 expressed concerns that the complex was being allowed to deteriorate while the debate continued.

"All of the structures are open and unsecured," assistant planner Ruth Lambert wrote to Community Development Director Michael C. Adams.

Lambert wrote that she had seen unauthorized people entering the buildings and that the situation was a violation of city health and safety codes.

"... Contrary to the property owner's belief, the fate of these buildings has not been decided," the memo said. "... Persistence of conditions and attitudes that actively encourages the deterioration of these structures constitutes blatant disregard for city processes and state environmental law."

Lambert's memo also went to Susan Tully, who until last week was the city environmental officer and in charge of enforcing such

codes.

Tully, who now is chief of code enforcement in Orange, said Wednesday that Adams had told her shortly after Lambert's memo was circulated not to bother with the buildings and that he would speak to Pacific Coast Homes officials.

"It was made very clear to me that I was not to worry my little head about such things," said Tully, adding that she was given the same message from another supervisor a few weeks later when she asked about it again.

Tully said that under normal circumstances the city would have given the owner a few days to board it up. Failure to comply would result in further requests and, ultimately, prosecution for code violations, she said.

Adams said Wednesday that he did tell the developer to board up the property and that the company complied.

"We didn't board every opening, but we secured where (unauthorized people) were getting in," Adams said. "Maybe it was not to the total security of the place."

Adams and City Administrator Paul Cook challenged Tully's allegation that the openings in view of their offices were not boarded.

"You could see they were boarded up ... but maybe there were some in the back that weren't," Cook said.

City arson investigator Gary Glenn said the boys arrested on suspicion of arson, aged 10 and 14, had little problem getting in.

"Access was not hard," Glenn said. "There was evidence in the other buildings that kids had been playing around."

Bill Holman, project manager for Pacific Coast Homes, said, "We have boarded the buildings on numerous occasions. The kids just come and tear the boards off. It's a real struggle keeping people out of there."

Adams disagreed that Tully was ordered not to enforce safety codes at the buildings.

"She certainly got the wrong impression," Adams said.

A less detailed memo than Lambert's regarding the matter was sent from Mayor Wes Bannister to Cook on April 18. In it, Bannister said that he has "noted that there is a tremendous amount of vandalism, which, if allowed to continue, will ultimately result in the total destruction of the buildings."

He asked Cook, the city's top executive, to "do something to protect their historic significance."

Cook said Wednesday that he doesn't recall what he did with the memo but probably forwarded it to the building or planning departments for enforcement. Adams oversees both departments.

Milkovich of the Historic Resources Board believes that top city officials who deal with the developer and support home construction rather than the museum might have been lax on making sure the buildings were secure.

"I think the only thing you can say is that it's a major landowner and (the city) will have to come back and make concessions with him on other projects," Milkovich said. "The decision may have been made that this wasn't worth fighting about."

Cook said he was unmoved by Milkovich's opinion.

"Has she accused us of hiring those two kids yet?" he asked. "I think the things ought to come down. They're a hazard, and to hell with the historical aspects. And you can quote me."

Meanwhile, arson investigators said they have all but closed the case, having obtained confessions from two Huntington Beach boys who admitted they were playing with matches. The youths probably will be turned over to the juvenile court system for counseling, investigator Jim Merrill said.