

A field of junk after the fire

August 31, 2010

Ron Rezek has worried for years about oil drums and a ramshackle barn to the north of his Washington Street business. That worry hasn't lessened in the wake of an Aug. 24 fire that raced through the junk-filled field before reducing 11 homes to ashes.

"It's always been an environmental disaster," said Rezek. "I wish it had been cleaned up in advance of the fire."

Now that the fire is history and the field dampened by recent rains, the owner of Modern Fan Co. hopes the property owner to the north finally gets rid of the old junk.

That neighbor, it turns out, has a long history of conflicts over the condition of his properties.

The 5-acre parcel to the north at 601 Washington is owned by Bernie Zieminski, who has had many disputes with both Jackson County and the city of Medford over storing cars and other materials on properties he's owned.

In 2005, county officials blocked Zieminski from developing any of the dozens of properties he owned in the county because of code violations. A county code enforcement officer at the time estimated Zieminski had received at least 15 citations in the previous 15 years, but by 2009 said the citations had been cleared up and all fines paid. Zieminski also had disputes with the county over his failure to maintain an orchard and with the city of Medford over an accumulation of old cars and assorted junk on property off Table Rock Road.

Zieminski, who said in 2005 that he owned 65 properties in Jackson County, also has proposed building a destination resort on an old ranch north of Central Point and a 1,350-unit subdivision northeast of Medford.

A 40-year-old homeless man, John David **Thiry**, has been accused of starting the fire just to the north of Zieminski's property. **Thiry** was known to hang out near a derelict barn on Zieminski's land.

Pushed by strong winds, the fire swept through the dry grassy field, engulfed the barn and jumped Interstate 5, burning 11 homes on Oak Knoll Drive.

Rezek said he plans to build an 18,000 square-foot storage center for his fan company at 615 Washington, which he purchased from Zieminski in 2008. Zieminski had been involved in a lawsuit on that property with a woman who alleged she fell into a septic tank that had a faulty lid.

After he purchased the Zieminski property, Rezek said he paid to have two ramshackle houses removed.

Rezek has an 18,000-square-foot facility at 709 Washington and saw the fire coming towards his building. He said he wasn't particularly worried because firefighters appeared to make a stand at his property.

Zieminski said he's been battling the problem of homeless people hanging out in a barn on his property for years.

"The sheriff's been down there at least two times," he said. "I've been down there and chased them off."

It's been difficult keeping the transients away from his property, he said, because he feels they are encouraged in the city of Ashland. Asked whether he would clean up the property after the fire, Zieminski said he didn't believe there was a problem.

"There's nothing to clean up now," he said. "It's as clean as it has ever been."

Even the metal frame from the mobile home was reduced to ashes, he said.

Zieminski said he mows the property twice a year and suggested that Rezek also needed to mow his own property.

Zieminski said he wasn't aware of any oil drums on his property, though they were clearly visible Monday.

Craig Bramscher, chief executive officer of Brammo Inc., which makes electric motorcycles, said he has been concerned about Zieminski's parcel as well.

"The property was kind of an eyesore," he said. "The barn was dangerous and appeared to be falling down. It was kind of attracting the homeless into the area."

Brammo owns a 2.5-acre parcel immediately to the south of Zieminski's land. Bramscher said the company plans to build offices and a research and development center on its property.

Peter Finkle, quality assurance director for the health-products company, Yerba Prima Inc. on Jefferson Avenue, said a seasonal creek acted as a buffer between his business and the Zieminski property to the east.

"The only thing we've been aware of is that people have camped out there," he said.