

Questions remain about how Oak Knoll fire spread

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Ashland police believe a 40-year-old homeless man with a record of felony burglary, menacing and trespassing convictions started the fire that destroyed 11 houses in the Oak Knoll neighborhood Tuesday.

Ashland officers found John David Thiry under the Exit 14 overpass at 3 a.m. Wednesday and arrested him.

He was arraigned Wednesday afternoon on 10 counts of reckless endangering and 14 counts of reckless burning and is being held in the Jackson County Jail on \$500,000 bail.

"We believe we can show he started the fire," Ashland Police Chief Terry Holderness said. "We believe he was most likely intoxicated when that happened."

According to Jackson County property records, the combined value of the 11 houses destroyed was \$3.1 million. Another three houses on Pebble Beach Drive suffered damage to their roofs.

To battle the blaze, 16 fire agencies responded with 135 firefighters at the scene.

Ashland Fire Chief John Karns said investigators are still trying to determine what the ignition source was for the fire.

He said it appears to be the worst residential fire in memory.

"This seems to be the greatest loss that Ashland has experienced," he said.

A check through Mail Tribune archives and with local historians indicated the last fire in which a substantial number of homes or businesses was lost in Ashland occurred in the late 1800s.

Karns said Tuesday's blaze started as a grass fire near a barn at the end of Washington Street on the west side of Interstate 5, then burned about four acres before jumping the freeway.

Witnesses said they heard explosions when the flames took out propane tanks, tires and transformers.

He said winds of up to 16 mph helped drive the fire up Oak Knoll, rapidly engulfing the houses.

"This was a very bad day," he said. "You had gusty winds and a very low moisture level."

Because the fire threatened houses, Karns said helicopters dropped water to help contain the blaze.

"Typically, we don't use helicopters on homes," he said.

Chris Chambers, spokesman for Ashland Fire & Rescue, said the initial call for the fire came in at 4:36 p.m., and the first fire engine arrived on the scene within seven minutes. The blaze was considered contained by 8:30 p.m.

Chambers said fire officials are still trying to determine when the fire jumped from the west side of Interstate 5 to the east side.

Chambers said the fire department did not yet have estimates of total damage to the houses and their contents.

Officials wouldn't disclose the evidence they have linking Thiry to the blaze.