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Gas grill blamed in Kensington apartment fire

By Craig Piechura
staff writer

A fire started by a propane-gas barbecue grill displaced 23 residents of Kensington Manor apartments in Farmington on Thursday afternoon.

Two persons were treated for minor injuries.

There was a 12-minute delay between the time the fire broke out on the balcony of Apt. 105, 33330 S. Manor, rented by Randy and Donna Grossman, and the time the fire was reported, G.

Robert Seifert, Farmington public safety director, said.

"A more timely call would have helped," Seifert said. "The delay gave the fire time to burn freely in a concealed space."

Witnesses and fire officials said one of the reasons for the delay was that Grossman and another tenant extinguished flames that were visible on the balcony overhang with a fire extinguisher. Meanwhile the fire was spreading undetected through the attic

space above the 16-unit apartment building.

Grossman, 28, said he had purchased the grill earlier in the week and was testing it for gas leaks, as the instructions advise. He said he noticed no leaks and lit the flame and was about to place coals in the grill when he walked back into his apartment. When he returned to the balcony, Grossman said, he saw a flame on the gas line spread to the propane-gas tank.

Grossman and other apartment dwellers said there was the sound of an explosion but fire officials said the propane tank was not ruptured in the blaze.

"IT BLEW UP like a bomb," Grossman said. "We took a fire extinguisher from the hall and extinguished the fire."

Grossman criticized Farmington public safety officers for the slow response time and vowed to sue Sears department store for selling him what he called a defective grill.

A tape recording of emergency calls at city offices revealed that the first report of a fire at the complex was phoned in at 12:37 a.m. by an unidentified older man. Police were on the scene three minutes later, Seifert said, but the fire wasn't under control until 1:47 p.m., records show.

Thirty-four firefighters, 18 from Farmington and 16 from Farmington Hills, fought the blaze with six pieces of equipment, Seifert said.

Seifert confirmed Grossman's charge that initially a Farmington policeman cancelled the request for assistance from the Hills fire volunteers, thinking that the fire had been put out. Most volunteers, however, were already on their way to the scene, Seifert said, and were on hand to assist Farmington public safety officers when it be-

came apparent that the fire was spreading through the attic.

A FIREWALL in the middle of the apartment building didn't contain the fire, Seifert said, because the flames spread through open eaves.

"There's a cement-block firewall that goes to the peak of the building," Seifert said. "But the eaves portion was open and the fire travelled along the eaves all along the building."

In his statement to police, Grossman said he tried to contact a telephone operator to report the fire but was unsuccessful. He told fire investigators that the delay in fighting the fire was caused, in part, by the call by police to cancel back-up units.

Grossman told the Farmington Observer that the fire spread rapidly after firefighters chopped holes in the roof. Seifert said the procedure is standard when fighting fires under a roof.

"The way you attack that kind of fire is by pulling it open," Seifert said. "You open a hole in the roof to allow smoke and gas to escape. When we opened the roof up we found the fire had already breached the firewall."

Seifert said the fire was not fought from above by spraying water down from the aerial tower because firefighters were inside the structure. The weight of the water could have collapsed the building in on the firefighters, Seifert said.

Eleven of the 15 dwelling units were occupied during the fire, authorities said, and four of the 16 people weren't insured for the loss.

BURNED-OUT residents were given the opportunity to rent an apartment the same night at their choice of three different apartment complexes run by the Beznos Corp. of Southfield.

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Smoke billows from the Kensington Apartments in Farmington as residents and neighbors observe.

DIANE COOK/Staff photographer

A real eye catcher

Dream home takes dome shape

By CRAIG PIECHURA
staff writer

The homeowner's name is Mickey Mall, and he jokes that that's just what some people who drive by the site think he's building. A shopping mall. Or an observatory. Or a barn.

Anything but a house.

That's because Mall's do-it-yourself house on Trestrain Street in Farmington

Hills doesn't look like a conventional home. His domicile is a dome home.

A 33-year-old bachelor photographer with offices in Redford Township, Mall has been constructing the triangles that make up the dome in his Livonia garage along with 8-foot sections of wall. Then he carts the materials to the building site, where they are bolted into place.

The concept of geodesic domes was developed more than 25 years ago by architect and futurist R. Buckminster Fuller. The domes are comprised of a series of lightweight interlocking wooden triangles designed to maximize living space with a minimum surface area.

The building design didn't really catch on, though, because few people want to live in what looks like a geometric igloo. Mall has avoided that problem by setting the dome on top of vertical walls.

The dome itself came from a kit while the walls are something Mall designed after looking at plans for dome homes. Mall said he never thought of himself as a handyman. That's why he is so relieved that right after starting construction on the home in February he became friends with a neighbor who lives across the street from the dome home.

THE NEIGHBOR, Ed Gerber, is a licensed builder and has been a carpenter for the last 13 years. Gerber stopped by last Thursday to help Mall align the studs for the walls.

In almost the same spirit that farmers would help neighbors raise a barn, Gerber freely gives advice and assistance to Mall. In doing so, the two trade quips and wisecracks.

Before Gerber leaves, Mall invites him to stop by the house this weekend just to say hello and maybe do some major construction work.

"I keep asking him which side he'll put the windmill on," Gerber said in a good-natured dig at the dome.

The house has provoked its share of comments but most are of the inquisitive nature, not critical, Mall said. The only problem is that sightseers often

stop by the site to ask questions, Mall said, which keeps him from his work.

Even the building inspectors at Farmington Hills, who Mall expected would look askance at his homemade home, have been helpful, though, Mall said.

"THE BUILDING department has been so congenial," Mall said. "Really, they've been super. They've given me suggestions. One building inspector even comes out on his own time to see how things are going and suggests ways to do things. Everyone I've met at the city has been unbelievably friendly."

Building Inspector Floyd Mean said other people have talked about building a dome in the city but he believes Mall is the first to do so. People wonder whether domes meet city building codes. Mean said the prefabricated material and the wood contained in most dome kits must meet national standards so most fully comply with building codes.

Building inspectors checked to see if the wood used in the foundation of Mall's home was pressure treated with chemicals to make it water resistant. The materials passed inspection.

In his job, Mean said, he learned long ago not to comment on the aesthetics of any house, lest he hurt homeowners' feelings. Still, he confessed that "Personally, I like conventional houses."

Mall doesn't mind that domes aren't for everyone. The home suits him just fine.

By October he hopes to be living in the house, with his friend, Jan Adams, enjoying features such as the spacious loft at the top of the dome. The home also will feature a spiral staircase leading upstairs, a redwood balcony all around the second story, and a wood-burning stove inside.



Working on the inside of the geodesic home are Ed Gerber (left) and owner Mickey Mall.

RANDY BORST/Staff photographer

Boucher case goes to jury

By Judith Berne
staff writer

The case has gone to the jury in the trial of former Birmingham orthodoxist Dr. Daniel Boucher, charged with first degree murder in the shotgun slaying of his ex-wife more than 12 years ago at her West Bloomfield home.

Boucher's recorded confession on the night of the slaying was admitted as evidence. A defense of temporary insanity was presented.

Closing arguments Friday by assistant prosecutor Edward Sosnick and defense attorney Thomas Blinn generally reflected testimony in the course of the two-week trial before Oakland County Judge Steven Andrews.

The jury of three women and nine men is expected to weigh heavily key testimony by psychiatrists in determining

whether Boucher knew right from wrong or was suffering from irresistible impulse at the time of the killing.

THE JURY deliberated about an hour Friday before being dismissed for the weekend. Deliberations resume at 9 a.m. today.

Boucher, now 58, is accused of the fatal shooting of his former wife, Blanche Boucher, about 9 p.m. Oct. 16, 1958, at the residence on Pine Lake they once shared. Earlier in the day, a judge ordered Boucher's 700-acre estate near Oxford sold for unpaid alimony. The couple, married in 1959, had been divorced seven months.

It is his second trial on the charge.

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Bill would hike water rates

By Bill Casper
staff writer

Residents in Farmington Hills and West Bloomfield may get socked with substantial increases in water bills if the city of Detroit is required to charge customers for the actual cost of water services.

Proposed state legislation requiring the city of Detroit and all its suburban water customers to pay for the actual cost of water services has been approved by the state House and will now be considered by the Senate.

The bill passed in the house Wednesday by a 72-28 vote. The bill's sponsor, state Rep. John Bennett, D-Redford Township, expects quick approval by the Senate.

"I don't see how they can vote

against it," said Bennett. "I think the bill has an excellent chance for Senate approval and I expect it."

Bennett claims the majority of the city's customers are subsidizing residents in the northern suburbs and the city of Detroit, who are undercharged for water services. Bennett said his proposed legislation would mean smaller bills for residents in Redford and Wayne but larger bills for residents in Farmington Hills, West Bloomfield Township and Detroit.

Bennett said the bill will first go to Gilbert Dinello, D-E. Detroit, chairman of the Senate Committee, who has "told me he will handle it expeditiously."

BENNETT CONTENTS that for the past 25 to 30 years certain Detroit sub-

urban communities have been overcharged for the amount of water service received and have subsidized other communities, including Detroit, which have been undercharged.

Bennett's proposed bill attacks the alleged unequal water rate problem on the legislative level, joining a five-year court battle also aimed at equalizing water rates.

The lawsuit, being heard by Cadillac Circuit Judge William Peterson, was filed by several suburban communities.

Attorneys for both sides are now in the process of filing briefs to present their respective arguments, according to Burt Burgoyne, a Southfield attorney representing the suburbs.

Burgoyne said he will argue that "for many years, the total water revenues collected by the city of Detroit from its

residents have been insufficient to pay Detroit's water department operating costs and capital expenses and have overcharged suburban residents to cover those costs."

HIS BILL would amend current law, allowing Detroit city officials to charge its customers as minimum and maximum fee by proposing all water rates be based on the actual cost to the customer.

An aide to Bennett noted that Farmington Hills and West Bloomfield Township each pay the maximum rate of \$5.50 per thousand cubic feet of water used.

But the aide said Farmington Hills should be charged \$8.02 per thousand cubic feet, while West Bloomfield Township should be paying \$11.55 for their share of water used.

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