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Officials probe cause of blaze

By Sharon Dargay and Judith Doner Berna staff writers

Investigators probing the ruins of Beth Abraham Hillel Moses synagogue in West Bloomfield have found no evidence that last week's fire was deliberately set.

"They haven't ruled out anything yet, but there's less and less chance it was arson," said Sgt. Bob Scott, spokesman for the team of federal, county and local fire experts who Friday completed their on-site investigation.

Late last week, new evidence revealed the last person left the synagogue at about 11:05 p.m. Tuesday, not 11:45 p.m. as originally reported. Investigators first attributed the apparent quick spread of the blaze to an accelerant. But now it appears the fire may have smoldered for one-and-a-half hours before a passing motorist saw flames shooting out of the roof, Scott said.

The fire probably began on the south side of the synagogue social hall, Scott said, where about 150 people played bingo Tuesday night. Trash containers were located in that general area, he confirmed.

Investigators from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Division of the U.S. Treasury Department will take samples of the burned debris to Washington, D.C. for analysis.

"It may be a week or two before results are known," Scott said. Federal officers who live in the community volunteered the bureau's services.

PLANS ARE in the works to rebuild the synagogue within eight months.

"Our goal is to have it rebuilt by the High Holy Days of September," said Nat Fishman, congregation president. "That might be a dream but it's not impossible. We have some very capable people in the congregation — architects, structural engineers. They have the know-how and with their 'push' it could be done."

The congregation has appointed a committee to develop plans for rebuilding. The new synagogue will be similar to the old building, said Fishman, a West Bloomfield resident.

"The concept we have today, we like. We'll probably have the same basic type of structure. Interior-wise, there are a lot of things we could upgrade."

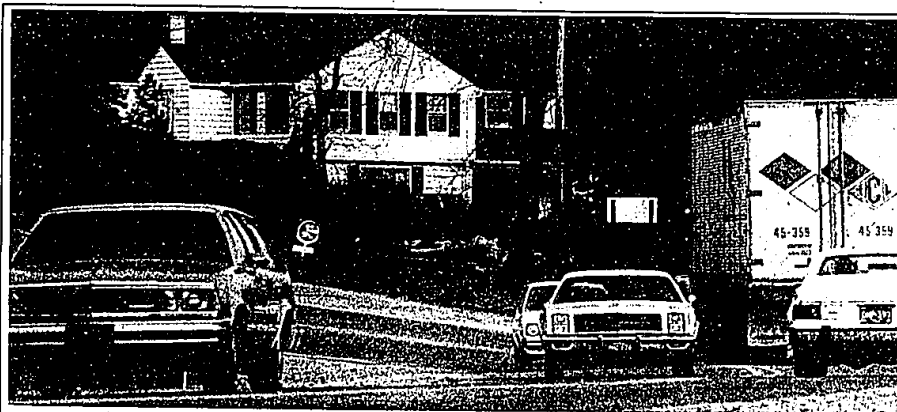
TUESDAY'S night-long blaze caused an estimated \$1 million damage, destroying the sanctuary and social hall of the 700-member congregation.

Fishman said the first floor of the adjacent school, where children study Hebrew, is in "fairly sound condition," and despite some smoke damage was expected to open today. The second floor may be opened by Friday. Meanwhile, classes are being held at Hillel Day School, 32200 Middlebelt, Farmington Hills.

"Within two weeks we hope to have Sabbath services in our own (school) building," Fishman added.

Until then, services are being held in the Church of Christ Scientist, down the street at Maple and Inkster. It's one of

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Once a quiet home surrounded by woods filled with wildlife, this home along Haggerty in Farmington Hills now stands as an intrusion between the expressway and light industrial buildings.

Urban boom turns homestead into a noise-laden fortress

By M.B. Dillon Ward staff writer

Twenty-three years ago when Brian and Myrna Dunn were outgrowing their Northville apartment, starting a family and looking for a house in the country, the two-story white frame house they found tucked away in the woods of Farmington Hills seemed like an order.

Time has left the Duns' near acre — formerly a refuge for deer, pheasant, rabbit, and fox — a silver of land pinched between an expressway and a two-lane highway. The 90,000 cars that daily thunder through I-275 and I-696 interchange and another 32-35 cars that zoom past the Dunn home each minute on Haggerty Road make so much noise that the couple and their four children spend much of their time away from the house.

"We used to take walks in a 26-acre orchard that was here. We enjoyed this house for 10 years, and then it hit us. It's changed our lives, and changed our thinking," said Myrna Dunn.

"Everyday our kids ask us when we're going to move." Listing the home for sale two years ago attracted a few lookers, but no takers. "Most of them said, 'great place for a gas station — how can you stand the noise,' or 'this would be a good spot for an office building,'" Brian Dunn told the Farmington Hills City Council last week.

"We used to take walks in a 26-acre orchard that was here. We enjoyed this house for 10 years and then it hit us. It's changed our lives and changed our thinking."

—Myrna Dunn

"What we're asking for is a zoning change to ES (expressway service, a zoning designation that would allow construction of a gas station.)"

In opposition to a planning commission recommendation, the Council voted 6-1 to introduce an amendment granting Dunn's request. It is scheduled for enactment at tonight's legislative session.

Mayor Fred Hughes sided with the planning commission position, and supported its reasoning.

"I'm going to speak against the motion — while I recognize the hardships and unpleasantness of living at that location — because accepting the proposal creates patchwork with the city's master plan," he said.

"It leaves us with a residual piece of land (a 4 1/2-acre parcel near Dunn's property) and a situation where the tail is wagging the dog. It negates the potential of almost five acres."

The decision, which also will affect the Dunes family whose land abuts the

lifted off our shoulders. Whoever comes along first is going to get it," said Myrna Dunn, a substitute teacher with Livonia Public Schools.

"This proves that democracy does work when the little guy needs help," said her husband, who teaches fifth and sixth grade and drivers' education in the Livonia school system.

"I'd like to commend the City Council for taking the issue on its merits and having been totally informed. We feel like we've been imprisoned in this house, and we're extremely happy with the council's decision."

Claude Coates of Vilcan, Leman and Associates and a consultant to the City of Farmington Hills advised the planning commission against the decision.

"(Upon our recommendation) the planning commission reviewed it and voted (5-3) to deny the request because it didn't comply with the master plan," he said.

Changes have come to the area rather slowly because utilities (water and sewer) aren't available yet, he said.

The high volume carried by I-275 and the Eight Mile exit — the last one for traffic headed north on the expressway — landlocked the Duns and easily earned the sympathy of their realtor, Joan Lorenz of Real Estate One.

"It was an outdated use for the property," said Lorenz, who appeared in the family's behalf before the council. This is great — we did it without a lawyer!"

"We feel like a huge burden has been

Energy is job for Rep.

State Rep. Sandy Brotherton, R-Farmington, has been named vice chairman of the House Economic Development and Energy Committee for another term. It was announced Thursday.

Brotherton also will continue to serve on the Committees on City Government, Public Health and Urban Affairs.

"Everyone is aware of Michigan's critical economic problems, and the Legislature faces some of the most difficult decisions in the state's history in the next two years," Brotherton said.

"Part of the solution has to be a long-term economic development program for the state that will encourage job and business expansion. The Economic Development and Energy Committee will be seeking new and innovative ways of improving the economic climate of this state and holding down the cost of energy. We in the Legislature have the responsibility to set a course for reduced unemployment, fiscal integrity and affordable energy. As vice chair, I will work to see the committee achieve these goals."

Brotherton said the concerns of local government and urban areas are of special interest to him as a resident of the second most populous county in the state and as a former Oakland County commissioner.

On his assignment to the Public Health Committee, Brotherton said the main challenge of that panel will be to provide quality health care for Michigan residents while keeping costs down. "The price of good health care has risen dramatically in recent years, and we must contain these costs without decreasing the level of service. We need to be constantly diligent to provide adequate care for every man, woman and child in Michigan," the fifth-term lawmaker concluded.



Sandy Brotherton

Cancer Foundation benefits

Video marathoners break records for charity

Q*?@ That's the message that greets you as you approach the new videogame named Q*bert at Abbey Road Amusements.

It also could describe what was going through Mark Dirasian's head after playing the game for 24 hours straight. Dirasian, a 31-year-old West Bloomfield resident, and Farmington Hills'

resident John Duff, 17, Wednesday embarked on a marathon attempt to score more than 10 million points — the world record for Q*bert challenges.

The pair decided to make some money for the Michigan Cancer Foundation with their video skills, and are seeking pledges of 1 to 5 cents for each million points scored.

It took less than a day for Dirasian to break the world mark. By noon on Thursday when he staggered home for some sleep, Dirasian had scored 12 million points. "Mark smokes an awful lot,

so we thought we'd better raise money for something he might need," said Duff, a senior at North Farmington High School, while dutifully manipulating the "joystick" and racking up thousands of Q*bert points.

Reached at his home Thursday afternoon, a groggy Dirasian said the Herculean relay will continue through Thursday, Jan. 27, "unless the machine breaks down."

"We'd really like people to stop by and watch, and pledge however much they'd like."

The record breakers, who were sponsored by Burger King, can be witnessed at 29218 Orchard Lake Road. The old

record of 10,069,000 was set in Ottumwa, Iowa at the Twin Galaxies International Scoreboard.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Video buff John Duff does his stuff on one of the arcade games to see what kind of record he can set for charity.

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