

Largest fire in 'many years' destroys South Side warehouse

BY MITCH DUDEK AND LEEANN SHELTON Staff Reporters January 22, 2013 10:30PM



170 firefighters battle blaze at South Side warehouse
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More than 170 firefighters early Wednesday were battling a five-alarm blaze that engulfed an abandoned South Side warehouse and jumped to another structure.

"We haven't had a fire this big in many years," Fire Media Affairs Director Larry Langford said late Tuesday, as the blaze raged on in the

3700 block of South Ashland Avenue.

One firefighter suffered a minor back injury and was taken to Advocate Christ Medical Center in Oak Lawn.

The fire was contained about 11:45 p.m. Tuesday, officials said. Fire Commissioner Jose Santiago expected the fire be completely burned out by 7 a.m. Wednesday.

The "extreme" fire was so extensive, emergency crews called two more special alarms, sending roughly one-third of the city's total firefighting power then to help, officials said.

Langford said he could not recall a blaze requiring that much manpower since the December 2004 blaze in the 100 block of S. La Salle Street.

Video: Live shot of the fire

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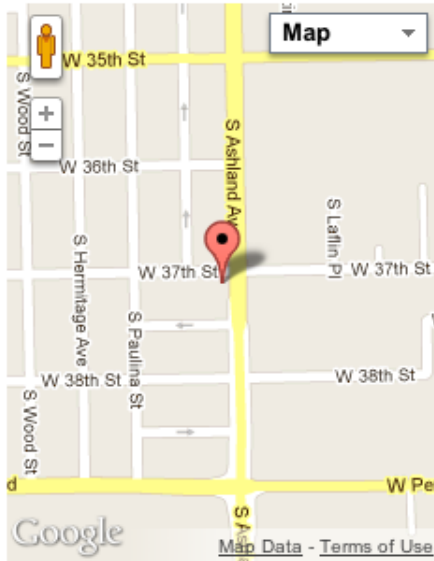
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On Tuesday night, flames were “out of control” on all floors in the abandoned warehouse where the fire began, but crews were gaining control of the fire by 11:15 p.m., according to the Fire Department.

The roof and three walls of the 200-foot by 200-foot structure collapsed as crews fought the flames. The fire jumped to another building in the 3800 block of S. Ashland Ave., but firefighters halted the blaze from consuming that building.

“We took that out right away,” Langford said.

“If this had gotten any bigger we would have called suburban firefighters to cover some fire houses,” he added.

“It’s turning into a big ice cube now,” Langford said.

Reports and photos of the fire spread across social media. The blaze could be seen from miles away.

Doc Luis, 41, an artist who lives about a block away from the blaze, said he had just returned home with coffee and went to his roof to watch the blaze.

“Embers lit up the night sky,” Luis recalled. “It was insane.”

In the past, homeless people had apparently started small fires in the building to keep warm, Luis said.

Officials did not know the cause of the fire.

A firefighter who happened to be driving by the boarded-up warehouse first spotted smoke coming from the vacant building and called it in to authorities, who responded just after 9 p.m., officials said.

The fire was particularly difficult in 10-degree temperatures.

Ice from freezing hose water glazed the brick exterior as the guts of the building burned.

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The uniforms of several firefighters were covered with frost and ice as they walked around the scene.

"This would be what's called a 'heavy timber building'," Langford said. He was unable to say who owned the building, which apparently had been boarded up for years.

A wooden pellet factory was near the building and a city of Chicago gas station was east the fire. Firefighters had fuel cut off from the station's pumps.