



CITY OF MILLS
EST. 1921

704 Fourth Street
P.O. Box 789
Mills, WY 82644

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Mayor's Press Release on the Cornerstone Fire

The Mills Fire Department has released an update on the Cornerstone Apartment fire now that the official investigation of the fire has concluded. The City of Mills wishes to thank the members of the Fire Department and other Mills agencies which responded to the fire, as well as the fire departments for Casper, Bar Nunn, Natrona County, the Natrona County International Airport and Converse County for their hard work and diligent efforts to put out the fire, which was one of the largest fires in Natrona County in recent decades.

The fire has naturally been one of great interest to the residents of the City of Mills and to Natrona County in general due to its large size. Perhaps not surprisingly, a fire of this size and scope not only captures the interest of the public, but also makes for a good source of speculation, much of it unfounded, which has happened in this instance. This release provides the details of all that is known to the city regarding the fire at this time.

The fire occurred, as the Fire Department's release indicates, when a gas fed heater ignited materials that were stacked too close to it on the night of March 4, 2022. The fire started after work that evening in the one of the unfinished 36 apartment structures. Nobody was in the structure at the time and there were no injuries due to the fire. After the fire started, it burned through the 1.5-inch gas line supplying natural gas to the heater, igniting the gas, and making the fire a gas fed one. As the building was under construction, it naturally did not have any fire suppression systems, as it would have upon being completed.

When the fire was discovered and reported, it was rapidly responded by the Mills Fire Department, the Casper Fire Department, and the Natrona County Fire Department. The Bar Nunn Fire Department also responded to the fire due to its extremely large size, as did the Converse County Fire Department. The Casper Fire Department, being the largest one on location, took command of the incident, which is much appreciated by the City of Mills. The Natrona County International Airport supplied a unique fire truck, which turned out to be critical in fighting the fire. At about 7:30 or so in the evening, Black Hills Energy responded as well, and turned the natural gas off at the request of the firefighters, allowing that source of fuel to be removed from the fire. Black Hill's quick response to the fire is much appreciated.

Early in the fire, crews deployed a combination of five ground and aerial monitors in addition to multiple hand lines to fight the fire. Because of their location, the fire units drew water from the hydrants supplied by the city water system which supplies water to the lower portion of Mills. As the amount of water being drawn to fight the fire was substantial, the decision was made to switch to the portion of the city's system which is supplied by a larger capacity tank that supplies the upper portion of the city. The reason for this is that the city wished to avoid drawing down a lower capacity tank to the point where it would have been later required to issue a boil order for Mills residents served by that tank. This determination was followed, and water was successfully drawn from the larger capacity tank utilizing the Natrona County International



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Airport's 6x6 striker fire truck which is probably the first time the truck has been deployed in an accidental fire, and undoubtedly the first time it has been deployed in a fire outside of the Natrona County International Airport.

There was never a shortage or lack of hydrants to draw from and the firefighting units were never short of water and precluded from applying it. The City of Mills stores 4 million gallons of water between three storage tanks. On a worst-case scenario in the middle of summer, the City might see 1.5-million-gallon usage by its residents in a single day. On a continual basis, it would take 12-14 hours to replenish the 1.5 million gallons from Mills' water supply sources. The night of the fire, crews were flowing approximately 2,500 to 4,000 gallons per minute, taxing Tank 1's 600,000 gallon storage capacity. Tank 1 is a tank on the lower portion of the system. At this rate the fire flow would have drained the 600,000 gallon tank in one hour and 44 minutes, however, once crews used 123,525 gallons of water Tank 1 reached a level that, if crews had continued to flow water at full capacity, would have ultimately sent the water system into a failsafe mode, shutting off the booster pump that feeds water from Tank 1 to Tanks 2 & 3, ultimately reducing flowing pressure to the high pressure system. For obvious reasons, the city did not want to reduce the flow pressures to fight the fire and did not want to deplete water to the point where Mills would later have had to issue a boil order. Monitoring by the City of Mills Water Department operated to ensure that water continued to be available in large quantities during the fire and that the water supply of Mills would not be impaired in any fashion.

Due to the large amount of water usage and the drawdown from the 600,000 gallon tank there was a brief pause in hydrant supply as hydrants were switched to draw from the 4,000,000 gallon tank. During the pause to allow crews to establish water supply on the high-pressure system, water was continually being flowed, even if only from a hand line, to help hold the fire in check.

All together crews worked for roughly 26 hours to gain containment on the fire. 2.66 million gallons of water were used to fight the fire.

Because the Cornerstone Apartments are intended to be a new residential complex with a higher population density than the existing one, the City of Mills had already made it part of the planning process that the fire hydrants in the area were to be moved over to be fed from the 4,000,000 gallon tank that was used for most of firefighting effort. This was, and is, to be accomplished during construction of the apartment complex as part of the City's requirements for this structure to be built. The fire proved the necessity of taking this approach although the fire coming when it did, during construction, before any fire suppression systems were installed in the building, and being fueled by gas line, made it impossible to save the structure. The number of hydrants and the source of water supply would have made no difference in this whatsoever but the change to the higher-pressure system should make for greater protection for the structures in the future when they are completed. This process is being paid for by the developer as part of their development of the complex at no cost to the City of Mills and is scheduled in the context of the overall construction of the two buildings.

During the fire itself, the City of Mills always had available other sources of water to draw from on an emergency basis, should it have been necessary. However, as the fire was a structure



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fire throughout, and at no point was posing a threat to the health and safety of individuals, the water approach taken not only adequate, but prudent in order to avoid creating later complications for the residents of Mills.

Since the fire there's been the suggestion made that Mills is experiencing an overall shortage of water. This is false. Some of the claims have been that this is related to Mills passing an emergency ordinance in order to drill a new water well on the grounds of the Mills Water Treatment plant. Such an ordinance was passed, but those who are making that connection have failed to appreciate that the City of Mills actually normally draws its untreated water from the North Platte River on a primary basis, rather than the wells. The reason for the Emergency Ordinance was based, as was made plain at the time it was addressed, due to an existing well silting in and there being a limited number of contractors who were interested in drilling the well and which had the time to accomplish it in the time period required. This has nothing to do with the water supplies used on the evening of the fire and as noted, the water for the City of Mills is actually normally drawn from the North Platte River. This was discussed in both City of Mills work session and a regular council session at the time the ordinance was under consideration and was passed.

Additional suggestions have been made that this event is somehow connected to annexations and development, but this is also incorrect. Existing water use was not significant in terms of this largescale fire. All of the water systems used in fighting the fire have existed for some time and Mills water users have not been under any water restrictions in the current year.

Finally, the claim that Mills has somehow avoided releasing information fully in this matter are completely inaccurate. Mills has released its files on this matter fully to those requesting it, who have been few and limited only by those directly interested in the fire. Radio traffic, which has been mentioned, is kept by the City of Casper through its dispatch facility, which dispatches for the entire county, and is not kept directly by Mills. When an inquiry for this material was made Mills coordinated with the City of Casper's dispatch office so that the requesting citizen, whom Mills had referred to dispatch, should have access to it. The City would likewise provide the same information to anyone desiring it.

The City of Mills greatly appreciates the assistance of all of the Natrona County Fire Departments which contributed to the effort to fight the fire. All of the Fire Departments which responded were instrumental in addressing the situation, and the City of Casper, which took command of the incident from the onset, showed its well-established professionalism, as did the firefighters from each department. The Natrona County International Airport's contribution of its unique firefighting truck, which was able to deploy 3,000 gallons of water a minute, speaks for itself. The City of Mills Fire Department also appreciates the knowledge and contribution of other departments of the City of Mills which was provided during the fire, and also the assistance of private entities, such as Black Hills Energy, in contributing to being able to fight the fire. The lack of any injuries to the public, and perhaps more particularly in this instance to any of the firefighters who were deployed on the fire, speaks for itself.



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The City always remains open to directly provide information regarding incidents such as this, once investigations have closed, and on the operation of its various departments.

Sincerely,

Seth Coleman

Mayor