



NEWS



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How to stop an Oakland-level tragedy from happening here?

Brian Rokos, Press Enterprise

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The fire in an Oakland warehouse that killed at least 36 people during an electronic dance music party Friday shocked the Inland arts community and has prompted proactive inspections and spurred discussions at city halls, fire departments and code enforcement agencies.

The warehouse, known as the Ghost Ship, was converted into artist studios and live-in lofts in violation of city-issued permits, Oakland city officials have said, and a permit had not been issued for the dance party. On Tuesday, Dec. 6, the Riverside Community Arts Association held a moment of silence at the behest of one of its members, a dancer from the Bay Area.

“This could happen anywhere,” Mark Schooley, the association’s executive director, said in the association’s gallery on Lemon Street.

He said cash-strapped artists gravitate toward economically distressed areas, and a community forms. “Suddenly, you have a coffee shop,” Schooley said, the area is developed and it becomes too expensive for the artists. So they hunt for cheaper digs.

None of the Riverside or San Bernardino county officials interviewed this week knew of any buildings being used for non-permitted entertainment or artists’ studios – but that lack of knowledge makes them nervous. “Our concern is, how do we find out these types of situations if there isn’t a complaint? I don’t have an answer,” said Riverside City Manager John Russo, who was city attorney in Oakland from 2000 to 2011. “This gruesome tragedy, it’s an alarm bell that we should take a look at what we are doing and are we doing it properly.”

Riverside City Councilman Jim Perry said he planned to ask at Tuesday’s council meeting for a future discussion of that question.

“Let’s take some proactive steps now,” said Perry, who discussed his concerns with Russo and Riverside Fire Marshal Jennifer McDowell.

“There’s plenty of abandoned buildings that we probably need to go out and see what they are doing,” McDowell said Tuesday.

Mike Horton, San Bernardino County’s fire marshal, said that as a result of the Oakland fire, he recommended Monday that his assistant chiefs have their engine companies do “familiarization inspections.” Firefighters will knock on doors of sites of their choosing to check for proper exits, access and fire extinguishers.

The Oakland tragedy, Horton said, is “an eye-opener for everyone.”

Riverside County Fire Marshal James Frater likewise said the fire prompted discussions about enforcement of construction codes and annual inspections.

OTHER DANGERS

It’s not just the underground entertainment activities at warehouses that concern officials. Buildings and homes abandoned by their owners during and since the Great Recession are tempting targets for squatters and homeless people. Attempts to cook and stay warm through theft of utilities or fire put themselves, firefighters and police at risk, officials say.

Banning city officials have been trying to take control of and raze such a business park on West Lincoln Street. Cal Fire/Riverside County Fire Department Battalion Chief Tim Chavez said this fall that the buildings there have burned at least a dozen times in the past two years, including a blaze in September that destroyed a 30,000-square-foot structure. Most were caused by homeless people, he said.

Andy Wingert, chief of the code enforcement division in San Bernardino County, said unsecured homes are the most typical threat to public safety.

“About once every 18 months somewhere in the nation, a firefighter dies trying to pull a transient out of an abandoned, burning structure,” he said.

The county just boarded up homes in the San Bernardino area and in Yermo, Wingert said.

Horton said boarding up homes doesn’t always stop squatters “and we have incidents as a result. We have been fortunate that we have not had mass-casualty incidents. We work very closely with code enforcement to do active abatement of properties and require owners to do immediate board-ups.”

If they don’t, the Fire Department begins the process to demolish the property, **Horton said.**

AFFORDABLE SPACE

Schooley, the Riverside Community Arts Association’s executive director, said even in areas such as the Inland Empire that are less pricey than the Bay Area, finding affordable spaces to live and work can be challenging for artists.

Some of them wind up in the 107-year-old Life Arts Center on University Avenue in downtown Riverside. Schooley said he believes artists pay \$200-\$300 a month to rent one of the approximately 20 studios.

Painter and musician Alex Howard, 29, is one such artist. The 12-by-15-foot space he has occupied since 2013 is located up the creaky, wooden stairs and through a narrow door. Howard once sold his art on the street until someone recommended the Life Arts Center.

Howard had not heard about the Oakland fire, but he said he considers himself safe in a building with labyrinths of hallways and uneven surfaces in some places upstairs.

“We’ve got the Fire Department next door,” he noted Tuesday.

McDowell, the city fire marshal, said the Life Arts Center meets all code requirements – a far cry from how the Oakland warehouse has been described. One former resident described it as a “death trap” crammed with clutter and often lacking utilities. A staircase to the second floor was constructed from wooden pallets.

‘CONFLICT OF VALUES’

Officials commenting for this story repeatedly used the word “process” to describe how code violations are resolved and squatters are evicted. Only in cases of imminent danger – locked exits, lack of fire-suppression systems, for example – can a place immediately be shuttered.

In Oakland, The Associated Press reported, the city’s Planning Department opened an investigation last month into the Ghost Ship warehouse after receiving complaints. An inspector went to the site but couldn’t get inside.

Russo, the Riverside city manager, said there is an “embedded conflict of values” in enforcing code restrictions.

“When you find a building that’s problematic, unless you can show there is an imminent safety hazard, there’s a legal process you have to follow. While the public clearly wants us to mind the store as far as code regulations, framed differently, no one wants an overleaning government to take private property,” he said.

Wingert, of San Bernardino County code enforcement, said the Oakland fire has prompted discussions among county staff. He said there are properties that by regulation are defined as dangerous – most often unsecured homes. Property owners must be given time to fix the problems, however.

Wingert said while he would not hesitate to “summarily vacate” a structure described in the Oakland case – people living in a building with a lack of required exits, illegal electrical wiring, heat supplied by gasoline generators – even then the order would be subject to appeal.

Horton, the **San Bernardino County fire marshal**, said it is important that anyone seeing conditions similar to those in Oakland say something.

“It’s not being the whistle blower – it’s going to be the person who saves somebody’s life,” he said. “Then we can take action on these facilities.”

<http://www.pe.com/articles/fire-820305-oakland-riverside.html>

Rollover on 15 Freeway Southbound Slows Traffic

Victor Valley News

Posted: December 7, 2016 1:33 p.m.

Cajon Pass, Calif. (VVNG) — A single vehicle rollover was reported on Wednesday morning on the southbound 15 freeway.

According to CHP incident logs, the accident occurred near the runaway truck ramp just north of Cleghorn at approximately 8:59 a.m.

When the San Bernardino County Fire Department arrived on scene they located the vehicle with one occupant that did not sustain any serious injuries.

CHP was contacted to assist in traffic control as the vehicle was blocking the #2 lane.

Traffic is expected to slow in the area until a tow truck arrives on scene to clear the vehicle and debris.

<http://www.vvng.com/alert-rollover-on-15-freeway-southbound-slows-traffic/>
