

[Fire report's release stirs residents' emotions, memories](#)

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Residents of northwest Colorado Springs had a mix of reactions last week to the city's review of the fire, often focusing on issues and emotions that continue to sometimes overwhelm them.

Their memories of the June fire are vivid: many choke with gratitude when they talk about firefighters and police officers who defended and evacuated their neighborhoods. They recall warmly how the city handled the lifting of evacuations and welcoming people home to areas where houses still stood.

But in the wake of the city's final after action report released Wednesday, some residents of Colorado Springs' northwest side have lingering questions about the city's response to the most destructive fire in Colorado history. The fire started June 23 and destroyed 347 homes and killed two people.

Recollections of the fire bring peace to some, plunge others into darkness and leave still others feeling not-quite whole. Whether they read the more than 100 page report word for word, merely skimmed it or avoided reading it, the residents of northwest Colorado Springs interviewed last week by The Gazette seek explanations for the things that hurt them the most.

Judy Anderson wants more credit for police officers who tore apart blazing decks and saved a few homes on her old street, Ashton Park Place. But Anderson, whose home burned, wants to know why she wasn't evacuated sooner.

"The biggest mistake they made was not to evacuate people early enough," said Anderson, who read the report. "I think they learned, let's act right away. I think they will do a better job. I think they better be prepared because it is very dry right now."

Anderson wasn't the only resident who read the final report hoping that it would demystify the city's evacuation plan for northwest neighborhoods.

Hank Scarangella, who lost his home, has puzzled at the seemingly arbitrary Chuckwagon Road boundary drawn in Mountain Shadows, dividing it into south and north sections.

"The original decision on the 23rd of June) to use Chuckwagon Road was a mistake," Scarangella said Friday. "It made no sense to leave the people north of Chuckwagon in Mountain Shadows in their

homes.”

Scarangella, who read the report, found no explanation of the decision and said that the issue has never been publicly revisited.

But, long before the report was released, he had made his mind up about other elements of the chaotic escape from Mountain Shadows: When the evacuation orders were sent out, police and firefighters swiftly shepherded everyone they could find out of the area.

“The fire was halfway down the mountainside,” Scarangella said. “So that said, the police department I think did a tremendous job getting those people out of there, managing the traffic flow, and putting themselves in danger.”

Ten months later, the memory of the officer who knocked on her door that day makes Anderson cry. As they watched the fire, she and her husband knew they had to go; what they did know was what to take with them, whether to crack their windows or turn off their air-conditioning.

“There was nonstop television coverage, but we had no idea what to do,” she said.

“When they police) put the yellow strip across that door, it just stopped our hearts from) beating,” she said. “Our house was gone.”

Now, in her new home in Peregrine, Anderson yearns for a few extra photos from her old house; if only she’d had more time, perhaps she could have rescued them.

Why did the city not empty the neighborhood on the morning of June 26 when it curtailed visits to evacuated homes a few blocks away because of erratic fire behavior, she wondered. The report didn’t say.

“If the people had been out of there, maybe the firefighters could have moved in with more ease,” she said.

On the other hand, in such disasters people must take some responsibility for themselves, she said, adding that they want to be told to evacuate rather than make their own decisions.

Questions about cause

Cedar Heights was one the city’s greatest successes during the fire, according to the final report. The upscale neighborhood was the first threatened when the fire started on June 23; it was evacuated that day, and filled with Colorado Springs Fire Department crews who worked through the night protecting homes. The neighborhood has become a poster-child for successful fire mitigation, another aspect of the city’s efforts lauded in the report.

Resident David Stevenson, who had not yet read the report, had one lingering question:

“The news said that there was no conclusion with regards to how the fire got started. To be honest with you that’s what I was kind of hoping for,” he said Friday. “That’s kind of what I think everybody wanted to

know. But I realize that it's an on-going investigation."

Gerry Weitz, whose home on Rossmere Street survived, shared Stevenson's curiosity. Weitz, who heads the newly formed Catastrophic Insurance Complaints in Colorado Association, has been so embroiled in insurance tangles that he didn't read the report until Friday night. He was looking for more information on the fire's cause, he said.

"I read about half of it," he said. "It looks pretty good. Reading through the documentation of events, one thing I haven't noticed yet is causation."

Like others, Weitz has lingering questions about evacuations and the initial attack of the fire on June 23. But his insurance troubles concern him more.

"I think most of us are too preoccupied and probably will be for a couple of years, trying to get some measure of recovery," he said.

"I want to hear what kind of investigation is being done not only into the cause of the fire, but of the consequences of the fire."

Mixed feelings

Kerri Olivier set the report aside until she had time to deal with it. Last week, Olivier was swamped in preparations for an insurance workshop hosted by the nonprofit group United Policyholders, designed to coach home-owners through preparing lists of burned contents.

"I was so busy just getting everybody together and getting the word out, and then the Senate stuff, I purposely haven't read it yet," Olivier said Friday night. Olivier has also lobbied for insurance legislation in Denver.

But, Olivier did not need a report to stir her emotions and recall her stew of gratitude and frustration about the city's response.

"I think that everybody has mixed feelings. I know for me, the overwhelming feeling by far is gratitude. Eighty-two percent of the homes here survived, we survived," she said. "You know, I mean, everybody pretty much, I think, feels that they just went above and beyond and did everything they could."

Olivier particularly remembers being allowed back into Mountain Shadows, where her home was still standing.

"The way they conducted the whole operation when they let us come back in, it was amazing, it was, like, surreal," she said, as she choked up. "It was quiet and peaceful and respectful and kind."

But Olivier is not without criticism of the city's response. Many friends lost their homes, and like others struggling with insurance, Olivier feels abandoned. The fault lies not with the people on the ground who evacuated her and defended her home, but with the people at the top, she said.

Olivier remains baffled by the firefighting strategy on the night of June 26, and believes that Cedar

Heights was given priority. She seeks an explanation and thinks it is because the city is reluctant to admit its mistakes.

“We can investigate all the time, and we’ll never know the exact timing and dynamics that went down,” she said. “My gut feeling is, in the highest level of city government, there wasn’t the cooperative spirit to handle this in the best way possible.”

For Olivier and many others, the memory of the fire boils just below the surface — vivid, painful and undying. They relive the worst moments constantly.

“The policemen put out the initial fire on my street, without protective gear lots of individuals did very heroic things,” she said. “What other kind of natural disaster can you think of where man stands face to face with it? Do you see people trying to stop tornadoes or hurricanes, or...I don’t know! We’re arrogant — we think we can hold back nature. But, are there places along the path of those days where, had the city cooperated more with the county, would that have changed?”

A new perspective

Jim Rottenborn spent a chilly Saturday in Parkside, one of the neighborhoods hardest hit by the fire, cleaning up rubble in a charred foundation. Two of his three young daughters danced through the windows of the cracked and graffiti decorated concrete, while Rottenborn chipped away at a burned stump.

Their Parkside home was destroyed in the fire while they were vacationing in Ohio. They lost everything, but have been the recipients of much neighborly kindness — the girls were showered with mountains of Christmas gifts. When hospital workers learned that 8-year-old Lily lost her beloved Teddy Bear to the fire, they got her a new one.

Despite the influx of community kindness, recovering from the fire has not been smooth. The family was underinsured by \$150,000, and Rottenborn has decided to save money by using his own labor. He has been digging up tree roots on both of his properties in Parkside, one of which belonged to an elderly neighbor who decided not to rebuild.

The work has given Rottenborn time to think. Rather than be angry, he decided he could stand to lose a few more things: His occasional irritation with his girls, his misunderstandings with his wife. The fire could take those, too.

He wishes the city administration would do the same — come to terms with its mistakes and move forward.