

December 7, 1994



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The State Port PILOT

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Neighbors

It was looking a lot like Christmas Saturday with the Oak Island parade -- 1B

Fire guts city landmark

Five departments respond to blaze at Hood Building

By Richard Nubel
Municipal Editor

Fire may have claimed one of Southport's most venerable buildings Sunday morning, challenging more than 40 firefighters from five area units for more than three hours.

The Hood Building, built in 1906, first home of the Hood dry goods store and later the seat of government in Brunswick County, was substantially damaged. The building has most recently been home to the Doshier Memorial Hospital Flea Market, an operation which allowed volunteers to donate \$30,000 to the Smithville Township hospital this year.

Brunswick County transferred ownership of the building to Doshier several years ago.

The fate of what remains of the formidable brick structure at the corner of Moore and Davis streets will be decided in the next few days by structural engineers, but many assume the building will be removed forever. Fire so crippled the old structure that three steel supporting beams between its third floor and mezzanine buckled from the heat. Firefighters feared the building would collapse of its own weight as they fought the blaze.

Emergency officials were first alerted to conditions at the Hood Building by an 8:26 a.m. telephone call from a woman who identified herself only as Mrs. Jenkins. She said she had seen smoke emanating from the building as she walked by minutes earlier.

Southport police officer Tyrell Rivera was first to arrive at the building. He noted the emission, but thought the situation wasn't serious.

"It was just a clean, white smoke," Rivera said. "I thought it was steam."

A key to the building was brought over from City Hall by emergency services dispatcher Charles Drew. He and Rivera opened the door.

"When Drew opened the door the air rushed in and it just exploded," Rivera said. "I called in, 'This is 10-18 (emergency) traffic, Southport.'"

Drew said the explosion resulting from air hitting the inside of the building was sufficient to blow the side windows out of the structure.

Southport volunteer firefighters arrived on the scene almost immediately, as some were already at the fire station a block away.

Fire chief Greg Cumbee said an initial attempt to attack the blaze from inside the building was thwarted by the amount of damage already done to the structure.

"When the first firefighters arrived on the scene there was smoke coming from around the window sills and through holes in the mortar around the brick," Cumbee said. "We made an initial attack through the front door. We got in about fifteen, maybe 20 feet, when we realized the building was fully engulfed."

"I made the decision at that time not to endanger anybody's life," the chief said. "We backed out."

Southport's ladder truck was employed to provide a water flow to the roof of the building, and deluge guns blasted additional streams at each of its sides.

Firefighters sought to contain the blaze to the Hood Building alone. Leggett's Department Store across a narrow lot to the west and Louise Parker's office building immediately behind the flea market were vulnerable, but spared, as firefighters doused them. City Hall, across Davis Street, was also considered vulnerable if the fire



Photo by Ed Harper

Ladder trucks from Southport and Long Beach were used to contain the blaze to the Hood Building. As the fire burned on, volunteer firefighters assaulted it with between 4,000 to 5,000 gallons of

water to spread.

Now fully aware of the severity of the blaze, city firefighters called for mutual assistance from Long Beach Volunteer Fire Department, owner of the only other ladder truck in the area. An aerial attack was made on the blaze from nozzles attached to the huge ladders atop the

water per minute, forcing Brunswick County to activate ten additional pumps to direct water to Southport. Water level in the city's one elevated water storage tank dropped to one foot.

Southport and Long Beach trucks.

Later, firefighting units from Yaupon Beach, Boiling Spring Lakes and Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point responded to calls for assistance.

Delivery of water to the city became critical as the blaze
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Electric costs

City users face more rate hikes

By Richard Nubel
Municipal Editor

With Southport's customers facing electric rate increases totaling 26 percent in the period between 1995 and 2000, an official of N. C. Eastern Municipal Power Agency will appear before aldermen Thursday to explain the city's "contractual arrangement" with the agency.

NCEMPA is a consortium of 31 municipal power providers in eastern North Carolina of which the City of Southport is a member. The forerunner of the agency was formed in the late 1970s and Southport joined the consortium in the early 1980s.

The agency was founded to purchase ownership interest in electric generation facilities, such as Carolina Power and Light Co.'s Brunswick units 1 and 2. The founders of the agency -- and the sales agents who got Southport aldermen to agree to join -- said part ownership of the power-generating facilities would allow the municipal power providers to buy electricity at low rates and would give the cities bargaining power in expansion decisions made by power generators like CP&L.

Instead of lower rates, however, Southport
See Rate hikes, page 6

Board takes parting shot for funding

By Terry Pope
County Editor

The outgoing board of county commissioners wiped out its contingency fund balance with a last-minute spending frenzy last week.

Items include \$30,000 for a football field-house at West Brunswick High School and \$35,000 for fire department equipment in Northwest.

"So, all of the contingency money is gone?" asked District 2 county commissioner Jerry Jones, one of two members re-elected last month. "For the next six months it's just tough luck, isn't it?"

Three commissioners -- chairman Don Warren and members Donald Shaw and Wayland Vereen -- lost their bid for reelection. The November 21 meeting was recessed until November 30, the final session before the new board took over on Monday.

Commissioners had \$83,000 in an "emergency contingency" fund and more set aside in the contingency balance. They also dipped into the county's \$11-million fund balance to pay for some of the items.

Jones voted against most of the items,
See Funding, page 6

Sheriff's door always open, Hewett pledges

By Terry Pope
County Editor

The doors are open now 24 hours, and the smell of fresh paint in blends of auburn and royal blue whiffs the corridors of sheriff Ronald Hewett's department.

Twelve hours after the 31-year-old took the oath of office, he remains on the job, making sure Monday's transition to 24-hour service is working smoothly. He has also had time to reflect on the agonizing decisions of selecting his staff, having to switch some personnel duties, and with letting others go.

"The bottom line is that deputies are public servants," said Hewett, whose office walls are lined with coastal memorabilia and honors he has received. Decorative rugs, a state emblem salvaged from the old Shallotte High School, and a solid oak desk add a professional touch.

"I as sheriff find myself as chief public servant, and it's an honor and a privilege. I will see that my deputies perform their duties and treat the public with courtesy and compassion."

When 911 began and moved the sheriff's dispatchers to another building at the government center, the department began locking its doors under a judge's

'The office of sheriff almost mandates that this office be open.... As long as I'm sheriff, I'm going to do everything I can to see that the doors are kept open.'

Ronald Hewett
Brunswick County sheriff

order to protect the magistrates on duty. Sheriff John Carr Davis said he would rather have men patrolling the streets than stationed at a desk at night.

Opening the doors 24 hours became a key issue in the election between Hewett and Republican James Brown of Southport. Davis retired and chose

not to seek re-election.

So far, Hewett says, he will keep the doors open by operating under an existing budget. But he says he will ask county commissioners for funding to "help relieve the stress" the service places on his budget.

"Whatever it takes, the office will remain open," said Hewett. "I would prefer that not be at the expense of officers on the road. The office of sheriff almost mandates that this office be open. I feel the citizens deserve this. As long as I'm sheriff, I'm going to do everything I can to see that the doors are kept open."

There are other changes on the horizon, too, such as the transition to a tobacco-free department and county jail. Additional telephone lines will be installed next week, to provide three each for the Southport, Leland and Shallotte exchanges.

The number of narcotic and detection dogs will increase from one to four as an added emphasis will be placed on drug control, from the street dealers to major traffickers. Officers will step up protection of battered women under N. G. General Statute 50-B, a domestic violence bill that allows deputies to

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