

# House engulfed in flames – all to train firefighters

By Kathryn Reed

Smoke fills the air. It's hard to see. Flames all around. It doesn't matter. No time to think; just time to instinctively react. Someone up the narrow stairs is injured. It's going to take careful maneuvering to get them out of the engulfed house on a gurney.

Situations like this happen all the time throughout the world. In South Lake Tahoe it happened twice last week and is expected to again later this week.

It's all about training.

A house on Third Street near the corner of South Avenue is being used by South Lake Tahoe and Lake Valley firefighters as live fire training. Barton Health recently acquired the tiny structure with the intention of demolishing it. (It's a short walk to Barton Hospital from the property.) The South Lake Tahoe Fire Department negotiated a deal to use it for training, with the end result being less debris for Barton to be responsible for hauling away and area firefighters more ready for a real structure fire.



South Tahoe  
firefighters  
use a house on

Third Street  
for training.  
Photos/Sallie  
Ross-Filgo

“There are some dangers associated with this sort of training, but it’s important to do it in a controlled way so they can gain some experience, feel some heat, so to speak, and overcome whatever challenges are associated with it so when they encounter the real deal they will be able to think more clearly and operate at maximum capacity,” Fire Chief Brian Uhler told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Firefighters are required to always be training, but the high-risk, low frequency emergency situations like fires, and water and rope rescues are more difficult for a small department to train for. This is because with only three shifts it’s not possible to take one off duty for training and have the others cover. That scenario works in metropolitan locations.

And until recently the command structure within the city’s department did not put an emphasis and priority on real-world training.

When Uhler took over in August he met one-on-one with firefighters as well as in group settings.



Firefighters  
discuss how  
best to  
approach the  
live fire.

“One question I asked was, ‘When was the last time you deployed from the station and went to and actually put a fire out during a training session?’ I got some blank looks and answers like ‘never’. I asked how long they’d been here and some said five years,” Uhler said.

Thus began a new era within the South Lake Tahoe Fire Department.

But part of the sparse real fire training had to do with logistics as much as higher ups. Plus, lack of a training facility and no overtime are other hindrances to getting ample time in.

While Lake Valley has an extremely old burn tower at its station on Highway 89 in Meyers, it’s not the same as a house. Carson City has a training site that uses propane, so the flames can be turned on and off. But that does not give firefighters the same feel as being in a room to watch and feel how fire behaves, builds and refuels.



A firefighter drags a hose to the second floor balcony.

Jim Drennan, who was is one of three South Tahoe fire captains to be promoted to shift commander, is now in charge of training for the city’s troops.

“The formula in my perfect world is to have the resources and funding to have a true training facility nearby and take one

engine company out at a time and send them to the training tower,” Drennan said.

While he recognizes that perfect world is not going to exist anytime soon, he plans to actively seek more structures to burn for training purposes. Plus, it’s cheaper for owners to have firefighters burn it to the ground compared to having a demolition team haul away the debris.

Of course there are a ton of hoops to jump through to do something like this – permits from the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, Air Resources Board and others. The Barton house had to be certified not to contain asbestos before it was ignited.

In the past, South Tahoe has coordinated with Tahoe Douglas firefighters to train to extinguish a high-rise fire. Wildland training has been done in conjunction with Tahoe Douglas, Lake Valley, U.S. Forest Service, CalFire and CalStar.

With the house on Third Street, firefighters are cutting holes and doing ventilation work before the fire is set. Then, as flames roar, the men and women sling hoses over their shoulders, dragging them to the second floor – all to get used to what that’s like fully suited up, oxygen masks on and heat intensifying.

“There have been some learning opportunities, some corrections were made in how things were done,” Uhler said.

To that end he says the training has been a success.

Next up is for the third shift to get its turn at training – that will be Dec. 7 or Dec. 8.

