

US: Tennessee home left to burn over \$75 fee

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A family's home was left to burn to the ground September 29 in Obion County, Tennessee over an unpaid annual fee of \$75. Residents have responded angrily to the disaster, as city officials defend the policy.

The blaze could have easily been put out by the fire department if firefighters had been authorized to respond when emergency calls were first made. The fire broke out after a trash fire spread from a barrel into the yard of Gene and Paulette Cranick, the homeowners.

Gene Cranick called 9-1-1 several times and pleaded with the operator to send help. He offered to pay any amount for the fire to be extinguished, but was told it was too late, because he had not paid for service. The fee is imposed by the city of South Fulton on rural residents who need fire protection but do not live within the city limits.

The fire burned for several hours, and Cranick and neighbors tried desperately to battle the flames with garden hoses. It was not until an adjacent field of a neighbor who had paid the fee began to catch fire that the fire department responded.

Local NBC news affiliate Channel 6 sent a reporting crew to the scene, where they filmed the fire chief, David Wilds, standing by and allowing the Cranick home to burn. When a reporter asked him why, Wilds called the police to have the news team removed from the vicinity, then the fire trucks left.

South Fulton Mayor David Crocker defended the decision, comparing the fee to an automobile insurance policy. "Anybody that's not in the city of South Fulton," he told Channel 6, "it's a service we offer,

either they accept it or they don't."

"Things of my mother's, my grandmother's, my great-grandmother's, were all there in that house," Paulette Cranick told the local news. She said she did not blame the firefighters. "They're doing their job, they're doing what they're told to do. It's not their fault."

The community has expressed anger over the fire. The Cranick's 44-year-old son was reportedly so distraught over the destruction of his parent's home that he confronted Fire Chief Wilds at the station soon after the trucks returned there, and punched him in the face.

Gene Cranick was interviewed Monday night on MSNBC's "Countdown with Keith Olbermann" from the yard in front of his destroyed home. "Everything we possessed was lost in the fire, even three dogs and a cat that belonged to my grandchildren was lost in it," he said. "And they could have been saved if they'd put water on it, but they didn't do it."

The firefighters, he said, "put water out on the fence line here, they never said nothing to me, never acknowledged, just stood out here and watched it burn."

"Insurance is going to pay for what money I had on the policy. But like everything else, I didn't have enough," Cranick said. "The mayor up here said I refused to pay—I did not refuse to pay, I told him I would pay whatever it took. But I had forgotten this thing ... and I had to suffer the consequences for it."

Cranick noted that the fire department used to make exceptions for fires at residences with unpaid fees.

“About three years ago in December, there was a fire up here in my boy’s house, and they waived the fee till the next day. We had the thing out before they got there,” he added, “but they waived the fee and I went in the next day and paid.”

Since that time, however, the South Fulton government has refused to put out fires if there are no people known to be inside the structure. Cranick commented that in the past few years, “They let three, and I heard four, burn. On the other side of Union City, they let a barn burn that had horses in it.”

The fire policies of South Fulton and an identical one in nearby Union City have long been a flashpoint between the residents and the local governments. Fatal fires are all too common in Tennessee, with the poor who live in mobile homes or doubled up in apartments, many without utilities, most at risk. In April 1996, a devastating house fire claimed the lives of six family members, including five children, in South Fulton. It took more than an hour for fire crews to respond, according to press reports at the time.

West Tennessee has seen a series of brush fires over the past decade, including more than 40 fires that swept across 15 counties in 2006, destroying 600 acres. Many of the blazes were attributed to outdoor trash burning, which is a common practice in poor rural areas.

On September 28, just a day before the fire that consumed the Cranick home, a fatal mobile home fire in nearby Atoka, Tennessee, killed five members of a family. Only a 12-year-old boy and his 6-year-old brother were able to escape by breaking the glass of a window; their mother, her boyfriend, two sisters and a grandmother died.

Tennessee ranks among the worst in the nation for fatal house fires. So far this year, at least 67 Tennessee residents and firefighters have died in blazes, according to data compiled by the non-profit Fire Team Tennessee.

After a South Fulton house was left to burn to the ground on July 2, 2008, the city government was compelled to hold a meeting to address public anger

over the fire service fee, which was first imposed on rural residents in 1990. The home of Richard Cruse was allowed to burn uncontrollably, in spite of numerous calls to 9-1-1. The fire burned for at least 40 minutes, while residents sprayed the area with garden hoses. Firefighters were not given the go-ahead to intervene until the fire threatened to spread to two neighboring homes.

At the meeting, residents expressed outrage that the fire could have killed people. Then-Mayor Ronald Haskins commented, “hate they lost the house. But if I wrecked my car and I didn’t have insurance on it, they’re not going to pay for it and the city is not going to pay for it.” Articulating the widely felt frustration of residents, a physician who ran a clinic across the street from the Cruse home responded to the mayor that it wasn’t in her code of ethics to ask someone if they have insurance or can pay before she treated them. “I take care of the patient and hope I get paid.”

Fire services, like other basic infrastructure, have been starved of funds in communities throughout the country. Many rural areas of the US have only a patchwork of volunteer fire departments to rely on in emergency situations. The economic crisis has stripped local governments of the most minimal funds for services, both from the states that likewise are crippled by shortfalls, and from local tax revenue.



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