

NOTES FROM THE FIRE BARN

Mexico's Middle Avenue Fire

Lt Rob Dixon

Monday evening, December 19, 2005 the Oxford County Radio Communications Center received a 911 call for a structure fire at 25 Middle Avenue in Mexico. Mexico Fire Department (MFD) was alerted 1 minute later at 9:35 pm. Mexico's Engine 1 (E1) responded with a driver and was the first unit on scene at 9:39 pm. In less than four minutes a two-firefighter attack team extended a hose into the front door, up the stairs to the second floor, and extinguished the main body of fire. Almost simultaneously a two-firefighter search team began a primary search to look for victims and fire extension. Perfect! Except the roof is gone, the third floor is totally destroyed along with half of the second floor, and significant water damage occurred through-out the entire building.

Did the fire service, not just MFD, and all of us as emergency service providers, meet the public's expected level of service? No significant injuries were reported and no damage was done to any exposures. This satisfies our definition for Level II Maximum Exposure Protection.

Let's jump to Level V Progressive & Proactive: I would have to say this level of service was not met. The occupants did not recognize the danger of burning candles in close proximity to flammable gifts, and an un-treated Christmas tree. This is an education issue. In our local area the fire service, working with schools, does a good job providing fire safety education to younger children. What is the fire service doing for teenagers and adults? Was the building up to code? Code enforcement is another problem we all struggle with.

When evaluated under Level III Industrial Protection: A working smoke detector provided early warning of a fire and most likely saved a life. But without a sprinkler system, or a fire extinguisher and an individual trained in its use, quick suppression is very unlikely.

Level IV Residential Life Safety Protection: Strives to minimize loss of life and property. In a previous column I stated "an early, *less than ten minutes from ignition*, aggressive interior attack on a fire is usually the most effective strategy to reduce loss of lives and property." Assuming a one-minute delay in calling 911, MFD had the fire knocked down within ten minutes of ignition. I also stated no one in the river valley should expect this level of service because the required resources are not dependably available. Mexico did an outstanding job! MFD attempted to confine the fire, did not assume everyone was out of the building and initiated a search to verify the building was clear of any possible victims. Again, absolutely well done. In my opinion there is nothing more MFD by itself could have done to minimize property damage. But could we as a fire service, with a committed public and united by a goal of preserving life and property, have done more?

Without question building construction played a large part in this fire "getting away." Through education and experience we in the fire service know building construction; old and new present obstacles that need to be overcome. According to Mexico Fire Chief Gary Wentzell, further advance into the building was inhibited by high heat and smoke. The presence of sustained high heat after knockdown is an indication of substantial fire not visible to the attack team. Additional incident factors included:

- (1) Firefighters to provide a vent (release heat and smoke from the interior) were not available.
- (2) Firefighters to provide a backup or second attack line to enter the building from another direction were not available.
- (3) Firefighters to start an aggressive overhaul were not available.
- (4) If a member of the attack or search team became injured, trapped, or lost: no Rapid Intervention Team (RIT) firefighters were available to help them.

Rumford Fire (RFD) was dispatched to assist Mexico at 9:44 pm, nine minutes after Mexico was notified. Rumford, anticipating the call, was en-route with two firefighters in their Engine 7 in less than one minute and arrived on scene at 9:48 pm, thirteen minutes into the incident. At 9:56 pm an additional request for Rumford firefighters was made and three more members arrived on scene at 10:01. Dixfield Fire was requested and responded at 9:57 pm. At 11:02 Rumford's Ladder 2 was dispatched to the scene after interior operations were abandoned, and arrived at 11:07. The incident was terminated at 2:45 am.

To achieve a level of fire protection as we described under residential/life safety, items 1, 2, and 3, (and preferably 4) listed above must also be accomplished within the ten minute window. Lets re-run this incident, change a couple things, and see how close we can come to meeting the requirements just outlined.

Rumford Fire with three firefighters, and Mexico with one, are alerted at the same time*. The first arriving unit reports a working fire and Dixfield FD is immediately dispatched. Also, RFD call force goes directly to the scene vs. waiting at the station. MFD E1 arrives within four minutes and RFD E7 arrives less that a minute later. In four minutes we have the firefighters on scene to attack the fire, start a primary search, provide a vent, extend a second attack line, or begin overhaul. In this instance, where fire has extended into voids and is traveling rapidly, firefighters from Dixfield arrive on scene much earlier, and assist with opening up voids and cutting the fire off. Additionally, we have firefighters available for an initial RIT, to help should an interior firefighter get in trouble.

This is obviously Monday morning quarterbacking. But this could be a standard operating procedure. Damage to the building would be reduced, master streams flowing thousands of gallons per minute are not required in an exterior operation, and municipal cost are reduced because everyone goes home sooner. Families are not permanently displaced and the tax base is preserved. Most importantly everyone is safer.

I admit this is not as simple as it sounds. All the parts are here on the table, it just needs to be assembled. We need to challenge the mindset of being individual fire departments constrained by politics and political boundaries. We are the fire service, we are firefighters dedicated to doing all we can to preserve life and property.

*(*This immediately satisfies Maine Bureau of Labor Standards law requiring two personnel on the outside before an attack team can enter the building. Also known as the 2-in 2-out rule.)*

Rob Dixon is a 20-year veteran of the fire service. He is a Certified Municipal Instructor with Maine Fire Training & Education, and a career Lieutenant with the Rumford Fire Department. Rob is also a Volunteer Captain with Andover Fire Department and a 2005 graduate of the State of Maine Fire Officer I Academy. Email: firebarn@frandford.org