

Police believe fire was deliberately lit

By GRETA CLEARY

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POLICE are not saying arson yet, but they say the blaze that destroyed the Normanby Town Hall was no accident.

A forensic examination of the scene was completed yesterday after fire ripped through the building on Wednesday night.

Detective Constable Guy Jackson said police were treating the fire as suspicious and had no idea who might have started the fire or why.

"We'd like to hear from any locals or members of the public who may have seen something or know anything about the fire."

Fire safety officer Pete Gallagher said it was hard to pinpoint exactly where the fire started, but he believed it was in the area of the kitchen and adjoining supper room.

He also said it was difficult to find out how the fire began, but accidental causes had been ruled out.

"We couldn't find a definitive cause for reason of the level of damage. There was no evidence of an electrical fault, or that mice and rats had been chewing through cables or anything like that."

South Taranaki Mayor Ross Dunlop said it was disappointing to hear the fire was deliberately lit.

The hall was insured for replacement. STDC chief executive Craig Stevenson said the assessors were at the site yesterday, but he could not put a figure on the damage yet.

The cost of demolition was said to be factored in, but he said there would be some funds available for the council to do something with.

Mr Stevenson said the council empathised with the Normanby residents and they would be consulted with about future plans.

It was one of the more well-used halls of the seven looked after by the council, he said, and it held a lot of history.

"Because it was a war memorial hall, the honours board was in the main hall. I'm not sure what records there are of that."

Many locals were taking a detour from their regular routine yesterday morning to have a look at what was left of the hall.

Sarah Lee-Rangi was upset as she talked about what the hall meant to the community and contemplated the cause.

"I would hate to think it was arson. It means too much to the community for someone to do something like that."

It's not the first time the town's hall has burned to the ground.

The first one was built in 1881 by a private company for £600 and that was destroyed by fire on August 1, 1950.

The community held a queen's carnival and raised £5366, almost double the target, to rebuild. That amount was doubled when it was decided to make it a war memorial, and the government matched fundraising efforts pound for pound.

It was rebuilt on what was then known as Victoria Park, now the Normanby Domain, and opened in 1954.



Detective Constable Guy Jackson (left) and fire safety officer Pete Gallagher examine the gutted town hall.

Photo: MIKE SCOTT