

Inferno destroys town hall

Gutted residents watch firefighters tackle blaze

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A HUGE fire destroyed the Normanby Town Hall last night as shocked locals looked on.

As the old hall was engulfed by the fire, massive flames and plumes of smoke could be seen from about 1km out of Normanby, with smoke choking State Highway 3 at the northern end of the town.

A crowd of about 70 people stood watching the fire rip through the hall from the corner of Ketemarae and Mawhitiwhiti roads in the town.

About 30 firefighters were at the scene last night, with crews from Hawera, Okaiawa, Manaia and New Plymouth attending.

Hawera fire chief Darryl Fowler said they received multiple 111 calls about

the fire and by the time crews arrived at around 8.40pm the hall was well ablaze.

Last night it was too soon to say what the cause of the fire may be, but fire investigators would be on site today, Mr Fowler said.

He was unsure if the hall had been used by anyone last night.

"The fire has totally gutted the hall. There was little we could do and with the wind the way it was it fanned the flames and the fire spread pretty quickly," Mr Fowler said.

He said South Taranaki Mayor Ross Dunlop and the South Taranaki District Council chief executive Craig Stevenson visited the fire scene last night and were gutted to see the hall destroyed. "It's a real loss for the community here."

Normanby resident Andre Martin said he lived three minutes up the road.

"I heard it go pop, bang, crack but I took no notice at first," he said.

Mr Martin thought the hall was about 50 years old and was put to good

use by the community — an indoor bowls tournament was meant to be held there tonight. "There's been a few parties there and the league boys have been using it quite a bit."

Another resident said seeing the hall go up in flames was sad.

Long-time Normanby resident Harold Jakeman said the fire seemed to have started quickly and followed a couple of loud bangs which he heard from his home.

Mr Jakeman said when he went to investigate the noise he saw the massive flames coming from the hall.

"I thought I would just go and have a look and all of a sudden it was up in flames. I'd say it's burning to the ground," said Mr Jakeman as he and several others watched the fire from the Normanby Hotel.

With a brisk breeze fanning the flames, Mr Jakeman said the old wooden hall didn't stand a chance.

Fire crews were at the scene until after midnight dampening down hotspots.



Firefighters attempt to douse the large fire that destroyed the Normanby Town Hall last night.

Photo: GRETA CLEARY