Arson official counsels residents about Magnolia Woods firebugs

By MELISSA MOORE

Chief Arson Inspector Glenn Sevier told residents of Magnolia Woods and nearby subdivisions Wednesday night that he sympathizes with their feelings of frustration about the five-month arson spree in that area.

“I feel a lot of frustration myself. I have lost a lot of sleep,” he said at a meeting of the Magnolia Woods Civic Association in the Kenilworth Middle School gym. City-parish Public Information Officer Dennis McCain estimated that about 700 people attended the meeting.

Sevier said the fire department has determined that at least five of the 11 fires in Magnolia Woods-Kenilworth-Staring Lane area since January were the work of one or more arsonists. The other six fires being investigated by the arson division are classified as suspicious.

Sevier said his investigators, along with city police, the FBI and the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms want the people responsible for the fires behind bars as badly as residents do.

“One more is one more too many,” he said of the fires.

“We are going to do more. We are doing more.”

State Farm Insurance representative Jim Crain told those at the meeting that his company insured five of the homes that have burned and is offering a $1,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of people responsible for any of those fires.

Crain said he’s asking the company to increase the reward.

When some residents complained that they weren’t seeing much of an increase in police presence in the neighborhoods where the fires have occurred, Mayor Tom Ed McHugh assured them that officers are there.

Experts have advised them that saturating the area with marked police cars may stop the fires temporarily, but will let the firebugs’ trail cool by sending them underground, McHugh said.

The mayor also asked residents to keep calm and warned them not to resort to vigilante activities out of frustration and anger.

“Tension is running high,” he said. “We want to be very careful that some innocent person doesn’t get hurt.”

When Magnolia Woods resident Martha Tan asked how she should tell which people are suspicious, city police Cpl. Gary Alford responded, “If he attracts your attention, he is a suspicious person.”

Alford said people should check out anything that seems out of the ordinary.

“I was in yards this morning at 4 o’clock. Dogs were barking. Nobody came out to see who I was,” he said.

Nita R. Bonnecaze told her neighbors she was convinced that police are keeping a close eye on the area.

On a recent evening, she and a friend spotted a car creeping down a nearby street.

Bonnecaze said she was sure that was exactly the kind of activity she had been warned to call police about.
Mayor Tom Ed McHugh answers questions about recent arson cases during a meeting of the Magnolia Woods Civic Association on Wednesday night.

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But when the car returned, she discovered “it was a member of the arson team,” she said.

After the meeting, Highland Park resident Margot Soule said she knows that police are out there, but that is not making her feel safe. “I’m sure they’re doing more than we know. I wish they could tell us a little more. I don’t get any sleep any more. Every time my dog barks, I run out to see what’s on fire now,” she said.