

Centennial School District hit by series of suspicious fires



Left: Workers clean up the carpentry shop for Centennial School District on Wednesday, April 30. The shop was damaged by a fire officials believe was intentionally set the night of April 24, causing more than \$200,000 worth of damage. The damage will adversely affect the district's summer maintenance schedule, school officials said.

Below: Reward posters, such as this one on the door to Centennial High School, ask for tips leading to the arrest of anyone connected to the fire.

STAFF PHOTOS BY JOHN KLICKER

Damages are more than \$200,000, including carpentry shop at Centennial High School

BY ROB CULLIVAN
staff writer

A series of suspicious fires set in the past two weeks have cost the Centennial School District more than \$200,000 in damages and heavily damaged the district's carpentry shop.

Gresham police are investigating the fires, and authorities are offering a reward of up to \$5,000 for information leading to the arrest of anyone connected to them.

Around 10:30 p.m. Thursday, April 24, a portable toilet was set ablaze outside the district's carpentry shop, which is on the Centennial High School campus, 3505 S.E. 182nd Ave. The fire then spread to the carpentry shop, according to Rick Larson, the district's director of business and facilities, who estimated damage from the flames and smoke, as well as water to put out the fire, at about \$200,000.

"It actually burned clean through and got into the rafters," Larson said as he showed visitors the site.

The fire burned the building's south end and all but five of the rafters. Joe Soulagnet, the district's maintenance and grounds supervisor, said a passerby on 174th Avenue the night of the April 24 fire called authorities after



seeing the blaze. He added that his workers have been able to salvage many power tools that were in the shop, but the fire did affect the district's maintenance schedule.

"It's going to set us back for summer maintenance if we can't get online pretty quick," Soulagnet said, adding that the shop's roof will need to be replaced.

The April 24 fire was one of four suspicious blazes the district has suffered. On the night of April 22, a plastic-coated steel garbage can outside

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JOE SOULAGNET, MAINTENANCE AND GROUNDS SUPERVISOR ON DAMAGE

the high school's main entrance was torched, causing about \$5,000 worth of damage to the front of the building as well as its gutters, Larson said.

Gus Lian, life safety chief and fire marshal with the Gresham Fire Department, said officials believe the April 22 and 24 fires were set intentionally, noting that an aerosol can was found in the portable toilet that was set ablaze.

Both times, at least two teenagers were reportedly seen near the areas where the fires started, but officials were unable to confirm those reports, he added.

Larson also noted that on April 19, two fires were set near the Centennial Little League baseball field, one on a portable toilet and another on a plastic garbage can, causing about \$1,000 in damages.

Whoever has set these fires doesn't understand the havoc being wrought, Larson said.

"My personal opinion is someone has a mental health issue."

The district's fire insurance will

REWARD

The Oregon Council Against Arson is offering a reward up to \$5,000 for information related to the recent fires in the Centennial School District. Call the Oregon State Police at 1-800-452-7888 or call Gresham Deputy Fire Marshal Brett Swenson at 503-618-2574.

cover the cost of most of the damages the fires have caused, with the district having to pony up a \$25,000 deductible, Larson said.

He added that the district's governing board held an emergency meeting the morning of April 30 and approved a contract for Cooper Construction Company to clean up and rebuild the carpentry shop.

Reporter Rob Cullivan can be reached at rcullivan@theoutlookonline.com or by calling 503-492-5116.