

# False fire alerts inundate hospital at alarming rate

■ Fire alarms at Sacred Heart are often triggered by dust and debris from construction projects

By Josh Ryneal  
Oregon Daily Emerald

Fire trucks screaming down the street is a sound the residents around Sacred Heart Medical Center hear on a regular basis, and hospital and fire department officials say that's not going to change anytime soon.

Deputy Fire Marshal Reggie Augsburger said the fire department received approximately five false alarm calls per week from Sacred Heart during February and March, when the hospital renovated a large part of its first floor.

After consulting response logs, Augsburger said that they've only received a couple since then, but other officials dispute this.

Jim Weston, director of Facilities Management for the hospital,

said alarms are often triggered by events other than actual fires.

"It's my impression that they go off about once a week," he said, adding that the hospital manages to contact the fire department about the false alarm before they send trucks about half the time.

Each fire alarm is thoroughly investigated by the hospital's facilities staff and 24-hour security.

"Some of the incidents are certainly preventable, but others are beyond our control," Weston said.

Weston said that frequent construction projects are to blame for the errant alarms and every effort is made by the hospital staff to contact the fire department before trucks leave the station. The alarm system automatically notifies the fire department when it is triggered.

He said the thousands of detectors are pulled and cleaned monthly, but the dust and debris that activates most of the alarms are unavoidable side effects of

the construction.

A few times, alarms have been traced to hospital staff burning popcorn in the microwaves.

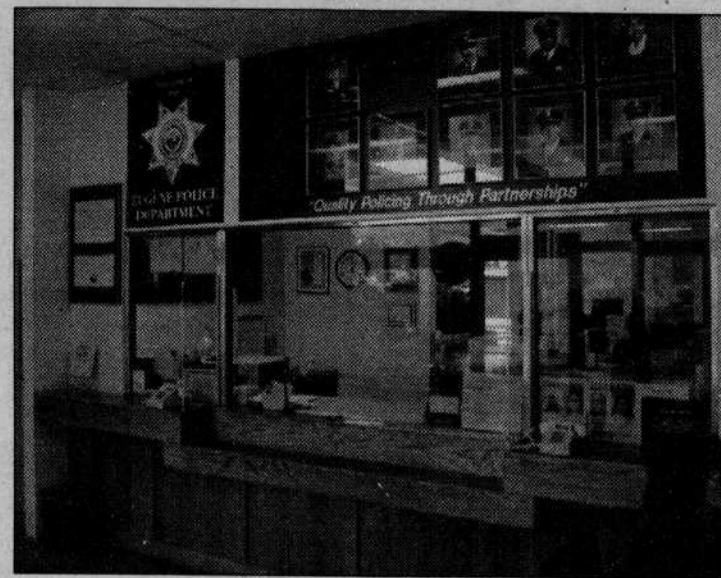
"We're trying to cut down on that," he said.

Jim Matthews, fire chief for the district that includes the hospital, said that every time they are called out to the hospital their team includes three pump trucks, two ladder trucks, the fire chief and a medical team.

"Because of the size of the structure and the fact that a lot of people in the building can't save themselves, that kind of response is necessary," he said.

The main hospital building is 680,000 square feet, and the smaller Oregon Medical Laboratory measures 32,000 square feet.

Matthews said that other large buildings, such as the downtown U.S. Bank tower, have similar problems with false alarms because of the complexity of fire control systems and large numbers of detectors.



Ryan Starkweather Emerald

Because of the failure of Eugene Ballot Measure 20-31, the Eugene police station, located in City Hall, was denied funding for the construction of a new facility.

## Stations

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not supportive of citywide measures because of their pride in their area," he said. "If you look at the returns, I bet you that will be an area where we lost heavily."

Torrey also said that the firefighters' union told him that they would not support the measure, but were unclear about their reasons.

Options open to supporters of the plan to provide the departments with new quarters include putting only the fire or police department funding on the ballot or simply using existing funds to renovate the downtown fire department.

"There were some city councilors who wanted to only put the fire department on the ballot, but I'm not willing to support a fire-only measure," Torrey said.

The measure's slim margin of failure has spurred the City Council into commissioning a survey to discover why the measure failed and to help revamp the measure and present it again in the November general election.

City Councilor David Kelly said that the survey, done by an independent polling firm, is only the first step in determining why the measure was spurned by Eugene voters.

"We want to get a sense of why supporters were supportive and why opponents opposed it," he said.

Kelly said that he thought people were opposed to the measure for a number of different reasons, ranging from lack of specificity in the proposal to outright dislike of the police department.

He called the idea of abandoning the measure "highly unlikely," and said that as part of the committee that drafted the measure, it was well researched and planned out.

Space is at a premium at both downtown stations. The police department currently occupies much of the basement of City Hall, and more and more important operations are being placed in a space not designed for them.

Rick Siel, a lieutenant at the downtown police station, said that when he first arrived on the force, the only thing in the base-

ment was a shooting range.

"It's not designed for people," he said. "But now we have our entire patrol force housed there, along with archives and things like uniform storage — a lot of critical operations in a space that's not big enough."

When asked about possible plans for retrofitting the building up to earthquake-ready standards, Siel said that while retrofitting is less expensive, it takes up space that is already at a premium.

"Retrofitting wouldn't answer the space issue, it would only make it worse," he said.

The downtown fire station suffers from similar space problems. When it was built in 1964, the station was not equipped to handle both sexes of firefighters.

Glen Potter, communications director for the Eugene fire department, said that while that problem has been corrected, fixing it has taken up valuable space.

"There are also problems moving important equipment in and out of the equipment bay," he said. "There's just not enough room."

Phil Weiler, Eugene communications director, said that the city government will have a challenge in balancing the need for new structures while presenting the funding measure in a way that will be palatable to voters.


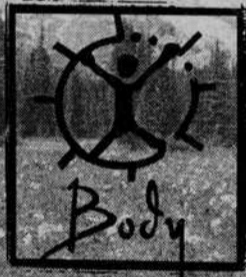

"We need to find something that meets the needs of voters, and this measure contained lots of little pieces that we may need to rearrange or move," Weiler said.

He stressed the need for new buildings for what he called "essential services" like police and fire units, and said that City Hall would crumble in a major earthquake. Weiler compared the City Hall building, which is built over a parking garage and supported by concrete pillars, to a pizza box suspended by columns of pennies.

"The pennies hold up the pizza box fine, but if you start to wiggle the box, the pennies collapse," Weiler said.

The same thing would happen to City Hall in a major earthquake, he said, and it would fall directly on the police and fire stations.

"The structure would likely suffer complete failure," he said. "We need to build structures that would last the next 20 years."

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