

Neighborhood Rebuilds, Funds Available

by Bob Lothian

Danny Chavez and friends were ready to leave for a holiday dinner on the afternoon of Jan. 1. Chavez had his hand on a doorknob in his house, located between Northeast Fremont and Beech on 10th Ave., when a huge explosion blew the door out of its frame and knocked Chavez across the room.

A half-block away on Beech St., Don Nickerson, unemployed and depressed, had turned his house into a giant bomb by filling it with natural gas. Nickerson died in the explosion, which destroyed five houses and damaged 185. Miraculously, no one else was killed or seriously injured.

A large vacant lot at the corner of 10th and Beech occupies the site where Nickerson's and surrounding homes once stood. A child's toy remains wedged into a cyclone fence, and a pair of pants flutters in the breeze high in a tree across the street — mute reminders of the power of the explosion.

Some neighborhood residents moved, others stayed and repaired their damaged houses. Chavez and others have had trouble getting insurance settlements. Many renters in the neighborhood had no insurance to cover the loss of personal possessions and the cost of relocating.

Several homes remain boarded up. The pastor of a neighborhood church worried that the vacant houses would attract transients and further blight the low-income neighborhood. He wants them torn down.

On the bright side, contractors continue extensive remodeling work on the damaged homes, work worth thousands of dollars. A group of investors is interested in putting up row houses on the former homesites, and the city has announced that up to \$500 may be available for minor repairs on houses not covered by insurance.

Those unable to receive help elsewhere turned to the Red Cross. The Oregon Trail Chapter distributed \$19,000 to 82 families affected by the blast through March 21, including \$4,400 given to Nickerson's wife and five children.

Ten neighborhood residents were slightly injured in the blast, including Chavez and his seven-month old daughter.

Chavez and his family are living at another house while they wait for an insurance settlement. Glass and debris lies scattered in the living room of their vacant boarded-up house. Plaster has fallen from the ceiling and walls. A vacant lot next door where a house stood before the explosion is now home to a pair of mean-looking German shepherds.

"We're having a lot of problems with insurance," Chavez said. A contractor sent by their insurance company estimated \$6,000 for the damage, he said, while other estimates ranged up to \$18,000. The figure is being negotiated, Chavez said.

They had hoped to move back in February, but now their family hopes for sometime later this spring. Around the corner, the small wood-frame home that was once home to Barbara Sailas and her two daughters stands askew on its foundation, its windows boarded up. Houses nearby display for rent and for sale signs.

Sailas remembers debris flying through the air, and "wires dangling overhead. My daughters thought it was the end of the world," she said about the blast.

They laid on the floor until after a third explosion, then discovered that their rented house had been knocked off its foundation.

Sailas and her daughters had no insurance to cover the loss of furniture, clothes and other personal effects, or to pay for the move to another house two



Site of January 1 explosion that killed 1 person and left others homeless.

Photo by Richard J. Brown

blocks away. That house was also damaged, and Sailas, who hurt her back last year and lost her job, does repair work on the house to pay the rent. "I've just kind of basically started over," she said.

Other homeowners had better luck with insurance settlements and things are more or less back to normal for them. Mabel Wilborn and her husband, for example, who have lived in the house across the street from the Chavezes for 32 years, suffered \$12,000 in damages to their house. She reported "not one bit of trouble" with the insurance company. Remodeling on their house is already complete, she said.

A new greenhouse-type window extends from the south side of Coleen Pearson's house, located three lots north of the blast site on 10th. "For the most part, everything's been taken care of," Patterson said.

Rev. W.G. Hardy, pastor of Mt. Sinai Church of God in Christ at the corner of 10th and Beech, said that in addition to extensive damage caused by the blast, the church has lost members and its school was decertified, creating a financial burden. He and his wife, Anorvia Hardy, hoped that the vacant houses across the street could be torn down before they attract transients.

Meanwhile, the Urban League of Portland has received a \$3,137 grant

from the city for a needs assessment survey of neighborhood residents affected by the blast. League vice-president Carol Lentz said a long-time neighborhood resident was hired to go door-to-door in the six-block area to ask residents what they need.

Lentz said that grants of up to \$500 per household are available through the Portland Bureau of Community Development for minor outside repairs to houses not covered by insurance and whose owners are unable to do the repair work themselves.

"What we're trying to do is find out how extensive the damage was," Lentz said. "Hopefully, the city will take the information and provide some kinds of programs so that people can get their

homes up to the condition they were in before the blast."

Portland Development Commission representative Cindy Roach said a technical advisory group with representatives from several city agencies is meeting to develop a strategy "for rebuilding Beech Street." Roach said

62% of the homes damaged in the blast were rentals. "Almost 50% of homeowners had no insurance coverage," she said.

The broker said that plans involve buying up six contiguous lots, but he stressed that nothing is definite.

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