

# Deadly fire rips through downtown business

By John Carpenter  
Gazette Staff

Nineteen displaced individuals and two fatalities were the end result of a fire that rocked the Columbus Junction downtown last Saturday afternoon. The fire began in the second story of a structure at the north end of Main Street, and eventually caused a major explosion, destroying the structure. The building is owned by Paul Buffington and housed his appliance business along with several living units. The building is adjacent to LaHacienda Restaurant, and Main Street Laundry. The adjoining facilities sustained only smoke damage, and are expected to reopen early this week.

The following statement was released by the Columbus Junction Police Department: *At approximately 2:42 p.m. the Louisa County Dispatch Center received a 911 call of a fire at 110 Main Street in Columbus Junction. The Columbus Junction Fire Department responded to the scene. Upon arrival it was discovered that there was a subject trapped inside the structure. This subject was subsequently pronounced dead at the scene. There were also two subjects injured in the fire. One was taken by Air Care to University of Iowa Hospitals. The other refused treatment at the scene. While searching the building a second subject was found deceased. The Columbus Junction Fire Department was assisted by the Conesville and Wapello Fire Departments. The ongoing investigation is being done by the Iowa State Fire Marshall's Office and the Columbus Junction Police Department. Assistance was also given by the Iowa State Patrol, Louisa County Sheriff's Department and Louisa County Ambulance. The names of the deceased and injured will be released pending notification of relatives.*

A considerable amount of speculation is being heard on city streets this morning concerning the possible cause of the fire, and whether there were adequate exits for residents. At the present time nothing official has been received by the Gazette office, but more will be published as information is received.

But we do know this: up to nineteen individuals in our community are homeless today, and have lost everything. The American Red Cross, with help from the Columbus Senior Center, have temporarily housed many of these survivors at the Columbus Motel. The Columbus Junction United Methodist Church, along with other area churches, have begun relief efforts. Many of the church families have come forward to prepare meals for these individuals, and some of the survivors have been obtaining clothes from the Church's clothes closet. But many more clothing items are needed.

Some of the survivors are children, and the United Methodist Church is obtaining clothing sizes for them and their parents. Also, a family has an infant, and is in need of basic things such as diapers and formula. If anyone wants to help, they are encouraged to contact the Methodist Church office at 319-728-2669. Also, see page 2 of this week's issue for a local collection point to give food and clothing.

But the big question right now is where these families will eventually find permanent housing. The Red Cross can only provide housing at the Motel for a limited time. The community is very short of rental housing, which has been an ongoing problem, but now with the loss of this facility, the problem will become even more intense. The city is exploring possible solutions, but if any citizen has ideas, they are encouraged to contact City Hall.

Anytime a situation causes the loss of lives, it is a tragedy. But as has been our community's history, citizens are already coming forward, and the Gazette will continue to keep you updated on things you can do to help. Also, again our Fire Department was faced with a possible disastrous situation, but through their dedicated effort, a fire that could have spread throughout our downtown business district was contained. A special thank you to all of the fire departments and emergency personnel



## Briefly -

Due to a production issue, the Gazette is limited to 8 pages this week. All regular features will return next week.

### Alumni Banquet scheduled

The annual Columbus Schools Alumni Banquet will once again be held the second Saturday in June. The location is Roundy Elementary School for the meal and program. The United Presbyterian Women will provide the banquet meal. Make sure this event gets on your summer calendar!

### Easter Egg Hunt scheduled

The annual Easter Egg Hunt will be held at Chautauqua Park on April 23, 2011 at 1:00 p.m. Children ages 0 - 10 are welcome to attend. Anyone wishing to donate please contact Lisa at 319-728-8115, and leave a message.

### Music Boosters seek host families

On Friday, April 8, the Columbus Community Music Department will be hosting musicians from Luther College's Jazz Orchestra. The musicians will be interacting with CCHS students in the afternoon and then performing in a free-will offering show at 7:30 p.m. in the school auditorium. Following the performance the musicians will need housing for groups of 2, 3, and 4 male students overnight. If you are interested in showing these students our Columbus Spirit please contact Music Booster members Kim Carson at 319-212-0580 or [carski1282@hotmail.com](mailto:carski1282@hotmail.com) or Donna Wittmann at 319-728-7705.

### Access road to be closed

The dirt access road between Flat Iron Drive and County Road X37 will no longer be useable to public access. The ground is being farmed.

### FFA to hold Blood Drive

The Columbus FFA will be sponsoring their annual blood drive on Monday, April 4<sup>th</sup> from 1:30-6:30 p.m. at the American Legion. If you are 16, you must have a parent permission form filled out, which can be picked up in the high school office. Last day of donation must be on or before February 7, 2011. If you are interested in signing up for a time to donate, please call Katie McWhirter at 319-728-2231 x 3621 or email [katie.mcwhirter@columbuscsd.org](mailto:katie.mcwhirter@columbuscsd.org).

### FFA Consignment Auction

The Columbus FFA will be hosting its 2nd Annual Consignment Auction at the old Sajak's building east of Columbus Junction on Hwy 92 on Saturday, April 2nd at 10:00 a.m. Doors will open at 8:00 a.m. and a food stand will be available for drinks and lunch. Consignments will be accepted Wednesday, March 30 from 3:45-6:00 p.m. and Friday, April 1 from 3:45-6:00 p.m. One piece or a whole line of agricultural or recreational equipment, or anything to help benefit the chapter will be accepted. All commission goes to the FFA Chapter! For pictures of consigned items, visit [www.mcwhirterauctionco.com](http://www.mcwhirterauctionco.com). If you have questions, please call Katie McWhirter at 319-461-3367.

### Visual Support Group to meet

The next meeting of the Louisa County Visual Support Group will be on Thursday, April 14<sup>th</sup> at Corner Market. For more information contact Lois Richers at 319-527-2630.

### Legislative Forum scheduled

A Legislative Forum will take place on Saturday, April 2, 2011, with Senator Tom Courtney and Representative Tom Sands, at the State Bank of Wapello Community Room from 11:15 A.M to 12:15 P.M.

### Letts Firemen Fish Fry

The Letts Fire Department will be holding a fish and chicken fry on Saturday, April 2, 2011, at 5:00 p.m. Adults are \$9.00, children \$4.00.

### L-M Kindergarten Round-Up

The L-M School District is in the process of identifying next year's kindergarteners. If you have a child who will be 5 years old by September 15, 2011, or know of one, please contact the elementary office at 319-726-3634. Kindergarten "Round Up" will be Thursday, April 28<sup>th</sup> and Friday, April 29<sup>th</sup>. This will be a 2-hour session. Teachers meet with students and the Principal will meet with the parents. You must be pre-registered, please call the elementary office to set up time. We are also accepting students for our preschool/childcare program located in the elementary building. Please call Busy Hands Preschool/Childcare at 319-726-3645 ext. 200. The preschool and childcare have limited space so sign up soon.

### Luther College orchestra to perform here

Luther College Jazz Orchestra will perform Friday, April 8, 7:30 p.m. at Columbus Community High School Auditorium, 1004 Colton Street, Columbus Junction, Iowa. The performance is open to the public. Freewill offerings will be accepted. For concert information, call 515-293-2956. The Jazz Orchestra concert program will feature Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue. The Jazz Orchestra tours both nationally and internationally. Recent tours include Brazil, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and the Upper Midwest.

### Summer hours at Marr Park

The Conservation Education Center at Marr Park will be switching to their summer hours beginning April 1, 2011. The summer hours are as follows: Monday and Thursday: 10:00 a.m. - 6:30 p.m.; Friday and Saturday: 12:30 a.m. - 8:30 p.m.; Sunday: 1:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m. The Education Center is closed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. We hope to see you out at the Education Center this summer!

### PEO to meet

The next meeting of PEO Chapter CX will be held at the home of Susie Leonard on Monday, April 4<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 p.m. and co-hosted by Deb VanAuken. The program will be music by Delaney. All members are encouraged to attend.

### Breakfast for Supper

On Sunday, April 3, 2011, the Shooting Stars 4-H Club will be hosting a "Breakfast for Supper" meal at 6 p.m. for the entire congregation of the Pleasant Grove Community Church, as a way of thanking them for the use of its facilities throughout the year. Also, the families of the Shooting Stars members are invited to attend the supper. Please mark the date on your calendar and plan to attend!

### Alzheimer's Support Group to meet

Henry County, Presbyterian Church - Winfield: Thursday, April 21, 3 p.m.; Louisa County, Morning Sun Care Center: Tuesday, April 5<sup>th</sup>, 6:30 p.m.