Inside the nightmare

Dispatches from firefighters and officials create a haunting account of how last Tuesday happened

By Pam Zubeck

It happened so fast. In a matter of hours on Tuesday, June 26, the Mountain Shadows subdivision went from bucolic suburb to war zone, engulfed by the vengeful Waldo Canyon Fire. In one day, the historic wildfire grew thousands of acres after a column of heated smoke and ash, visible for miles in every direction, collapsed on the city’s northwest side.

By now, we all know what it wrought. Two people died in the fire, at a house in North Mountain Shadows. At least 346 homes were destroyed and hundreds more were damaged. Even if the blaze — 17,920 acres and 70 percent contained as of press time — didn’t burn another structure, losses could top $170 million for the homes alone, based on an estimate using property values from the El Paso County assessor. (Fighting the fire has cost another $12.3 million.)

The tolls could have been much higher but for the heroics of hundreds of firefighters who stood their ground against the blaze, even using garden hoses at times, and aided by several police officers who took it on without protective gear.

Because of their efforts, upward of 75 percent of the homes in Mountain Shadows were saved. Clearly, a lot went right. But their neighbors north of Chuckwagon Road, in the other half of Mountain Shadows, weren’t told to evacuate until 5:45 p.m. Saturday. That was more than five hours after press releases noted “changes in fire behavior,” and more than three hours after the city called the fire “aggressive” but urged residents only to “consider evacuation planning.”

Though Mayor Steve Bach reportedly ordered people to evacuate midway through the 4 p.m. press briefing, the city didn’t send a press release until 5:15. By then, the fire had started to barrel into their neighborhoods, ready to claim entire blocks of property and 40 percent of all homes that would be destroyed that night.

And yet a top-ranking city fire official has said he’s sure the evacuation orders for North Mountain Shadows and Peregrine were “spot on.”

The first days

Scott Campbell, the county’s deputy fire marshal with 25 years’ wildland firefighting experience, got the call between 11 a.m. and noon on Saturday, June 23, about a fire in Waldo Canyon.

“When I came down the road and saw the column and saw it was 35 to 40 acres,” Campbell says in an interview, “with that wind, we just knew it was going big.”

Campbell says he made some aircraft orders into dispatch from his truck, and Pike National Forest fire management officer Eric Zanotto made some more.

Colorado Springs Utilities’ wildland firefighting team, called at 12:30, headed to the ridge above Cedar Heights to protect a tower Utilities uses, says firefighter Sandi Yukman.

Forestry officials started sweeping campers out of campgrounds and preparing for evacuations of Cascade, Green Mountain Falls and Crystola. Most of a 35-volunteer county wildland team and an AmeriCorps team from the National Interagency Fire Center went to the fire’s west side to create a “speed bump” between it and Cascade, says Campbell, who over that weekend served as deputy incident commander under Zanotto.

Meanwhile, Campbell’s team also coordinated with Colorado Springs Fire Department, which worked above the 178-home Cedar Heights area, as well as smaller departments from the Ute Pass area. Aircraft began dropping retardant, and helicopters emptied water buckets on the fire, Campbell says.

By 5:45 p.m. Saturday, mandatory evacuations had been issued for Cedar Heights and Mountain Shadows south of Chuckwagon, as well as towns along Ute Pass. Manitou Springs would follow early Sunday morning. U.S. Highway 24 was closed between Cave of the Winds and Crystola hours later.

Campbell says firefighters feared the fire would throw embers up to a half-mile from treetops. “On Sunday when it was really growing,” he says, “it was like a Hiroshima bomb going off every 10 minutes.”

The size of the fire — 3,446 acres by the time Zanotto and Campbell relinquished control to a “Type 1” team led by Rich Harvey on Monday morning — and its power mandated such a breakneck pace of assignments and evacuations.

“We have a saying,” Campbell says. “We call it the Haul Chart. In 1- to 3-foot flames, we haul tools. Three to 5 feet, we haul equipment and water. And above 7 feet, we haul ass. The only thing to do with 100-foot flame lengths is get out of the way.”

The buildup

By 10 p.m. Monday, the fire had spread to 4,500 acres, and 600 fire personnel were at work, according to incident update reports. Aircraft were dropping retardant along Rampart Range Road and the fire’s east flank.

Yukman’s 14-member wildland team worked into the wee hours of the night. They cut a line above Cedar Heights — which she says accounts for the fire’s first 5 percent containment figure — and then moved over to the Queen’s Canyon area to make a barrier to the city’s water tanks above Glen Eyrie.

Her team returned at 9 a.m. Tuesday, to the north flank. Above them, a cloud was building. “Smoke billows up from the fire and creates a very high cloud column,” Yukman explains.

Campbell saw it too, from the opposite side of the fire, where he was giving county commissioners a look at the operation.

“I was showing them how the column builds and all the mass that’s in it,” he says. “If it keeps going, it could be to the point the collapse would happen. When I got back to the ICP [incident command post on the west side of the city], the head of the column was out over town.”

The mass had all the earmarks of a pyrocumulus cloud, he says, which forms from smoke, moisture from burning vegetation, and particulates from the fire.

“There’s tens, perhaps hundreds, of millions of cubic yards of mass up in the sky held up there by heat,” he says. “Topography directs where that wind goes. If you’re in a steep canyon, the speed is a lot higher and it pushes in all directions.”

Despite red-flag weather conditions, including an all-time historic high temperature of 101 degrees, the city issued a statement at 10:52 a.m., saying Mountain Shadows evacuees could return to their homes for a half-hour. Forty minutes later, the city canceled the return in another release, stating, “Due to the current changes in fire behavior, no return visits to Cedar Heights or Mountain Shadows are allowed at this time.”

At 1:40 p.m., the city issued a pre-evac-
The disaster

After getting their bearings, Campbell and his firefighters, and Yukman and her crew headed for Mountain Shadows, where fire poured down the ridge. Dozens of Springs firefighters were on hand, as well as dozens from neighboring departments under the command of Schanel.

“Everybody assisted," Campbell says. “Forest Service green engines. Colorado Springs red engines. Cooperator from outlying areas in there. We were setting up our groups. We’re yelling at each other trying to get a toehold somewhere so we can make a stand to prevent it from pushing further in, because the wind was howling." When he drove in, he had to keep his head behind the vehicle panel, because the window glass was so hot from the 30 to 40 houses "fully involved." Firefighters searched for a place to make a stand, he says, and police officers jumped in.

“We had policeman in there in their duty uniforms who were helping us, and they wouldn’t leave,” he says. “They said, ‘We have to do something’.

“We had places where our fire guys were going in with 1-inch fire line [gard en hoses], between houses that are 10 feet apart and this one's on fire and this one's not, trying to spray the house down. Guys pulled the decks off, knocked down the fire on the outside of the window, and the guys jumped in the house with a garden hose. If the fence was on fire, we’d knock it down. We were knocking stuff down, cutting trees out of the way, dragging them into the street.

“There was a pool in one place, the guys had five-gallon buckets and were throwing it on stuff. Whatever you can do. Seven or eight houses burned right up to the road. The engines are standing there. They held it there.”

Crews worked through the night with “many, many” homes fully engulfed, according to Yukman. “We saw only the outline of the homes because of the flames. You ask yourself, ‘Can you make a difference?’ If you can’t, you go to the next one.”

Yukman found it hard to breathe and see; she kept track of her crew by watching for their head lamps.

“There was just a lot of fire and embers floating around that were hot. It looked like a bomb exploded. It was like a war was going on, because of [exploding] propane tanks,” she says. Natural gas in pipelines burned blue, and walls and chimneys crashed to the ground next to them.

“A as far as we could see, everything was on fire,” she says. “We all stood there for a minute and said, ‘I can’t believe this is happening. How are we ever going to get these fires out?’"

Martyniak, who spent 54 hours on the fireline from Tuesday through Thursday, says that by late Tuesday night, all off-duty Springs firefighters were called to work the fire or backfill stations across the city. When it was time for shift change, about 1:30 a.m., Yukman says 200 firefighters were waiting to go in. And through the morning, the firefighting continued.

Lt. Mike Skeldum’s Fountain Fire Department crew worked mostly on Rossmere Street and Wilson Road. In one case, his team saw a fireball land on the roof of an untouched house. They raced inside the house and put out the fire. According to the city’s list of destroyed homes, only 17 of the 87 houses on Wilson were a total loss, as were only nine of the 79 homes on Rossmere. But they were the ones that touched Skeldum.

“Bicycles, basketball hoops, project cars, cars in garages were just burnt metal,” he says. “On the majority of them, the mail boxes were still up. There were a couple of houses the door was still intact but there was nothing behind it. A lot of people had turned sprinklers on and put them on porches or roofs. All that will be mass up in the air, gravity is on duty 24/7, so it’s always something to watch,” he says. “But there’s nothing you can do about it but get out of the way.”

That decision — of when to evacuate and how — is made by the authority of each local jurisdiction and is based on information provided by the incident commander and others. In press conferences, Harvey has urged decision-makers to err on the side of caution.

El Paso County Sheriff Terry Maketa says he evacuated Ute Pass on the county side of the fire on that first Saturday to assure citizens’ safety. Manitou’s mayor, Marc Snyder, and fire chief made their evac call early Sunday morning.

“I had full decision [sic] authority on all county evacs,” Maketa says in an e-mail, “and at the time they were directed I simply notified the IC and carried our evac plan.”

Tim Johnson, public information officer with the federal incident management team, says inside city limits, “ultimately, it’s the mayor” who makes an evacuation call.

Cindy Aubrey, Bach’s communications director, says in a text message to The Indy that the city had issued an evacuation alert and there were voluntary evacs in place, adding, “Both the city and the team did all we could to ensure the safety of the citizens.”

Asked Friday afternoon if city officials are happy with how the evacuations of North Mountain Shadows and Peregrine were handled, whether they were done properly and in a timely way, Springs Deputy Fire Chief Tommy Smith said they were.

“Knowing the profession the way I do and how concerned they are with people’s safety, absolutely,” he said. “I’m sure they were spot on in giving adequate notice to residents.”

Regarding what was said on that fateful Tuesday about evacuations and fire behavior, Heule won’t say specifically, though he notes, “Definitely the discussions were held about what should be done and when it should be done.”

He also adds that, having served with Springs Fire Chief Rich Brown, he trusts Brown’s judgment. “If he said we can stay, we can stay. If he said we need to go, we need to go. I would trust him with my life.”

— Zubeck@csindy.com
Seeing through the haze
A month after the Waldo Canyon Fire began, records raise more questions about early decisions

By Pam Zubeck

Colorado Springs has for years had agreements with surrounding fire departments that allow the city to call on them when needed. But many of those resources sat idle for days leading up to Tuesday, June 26, when the Waldo Canyon Fire blasted into Mountain Shadows to claim 345 homes and two lives.

Jerry Schnabel (left) and Mac Shafer offered Transit Mix equipment in vain.

The city made no secret of its desire to help, but it appears officials there were unprepared to face the full force of the blaze that had been burning for days. City officials' responses to the outcry, in addition to what happened, raise a series of questions about the city's response to the fire.

Given more time to escape their Mountain Shadows home that day, Bach declined an interview request last week, as did Fire Chief Rich Brown, Deputy Chief Steve Dubay and Emergency Management director Bret Waters. But Bach asserted in a press release Friday “his strong belief that, based on all current information available, the Colorado Springs Fire and Police departments did everything humanly possible, as soon as possible, to aid and assist all of our citizens.”

No one doubts that firefighters performed spectacularly in Mountain Shadows, confining the fire to one subdivision. But fire operations reports and other records suggest fire commanders knew they had a beast at the door, and said so — often — well before the homes burned.

Deploying resources
U.S. Forest Service and El Paso County Sheriff’s Office records obtained by the Independent describe an aggressive fire that moved steadily to the north, northwest and northeast. On its first day, Saturday, June 23, operational plans written by a Type 3 Incident Command team of county and federal forestry officials cited “extreme fire behavior” and identified Mountain Shadows as an area of concern.

On Sunday, Incident Command officials noted they hoped on Monday to keep the fire “west of I-25” and identified the entire western boundary of Colorado Springs from U.S. 24 at 31st Street north to the Air Force Academy as part of their “control operations.” By early Monday, the day federal officials took over with a Type 1 team, the fire had grown to 3,600 acres. The Haines Index — a measure of rapid forest-fire growth potential — stood at 6, the highest possible rating, as it would the next day.

The city, according to a report written Saturday night, had 25 apparatus, including three from Utilities, assigned to the fire Sunday. Sunday night’s report showed 24 total city apparatus assigned for Monday.

In a document time-stamped 6:30 p.m. Monday, Incident Command officials wrote, “Potential for extreme fire behavior with rapid rates of spread and high resistance to control.” It listed Mountain Shadows and the Air Force Academy as among the “values at risk” for the coming 24-hour period.

The nightly Incident Command report, outlining operations for Tuesday, was equally foreboding: “SW winds will test the line,” it said, referring to the area from Cedar Heights to the Black Canyon quarry south of there.

The Incident Command team provides intelligence on fire behavior, trajectory, weather predictions and the like, and serves as a coordination point for local jurisdictions. But it doesn’t tell local jurisdictions what to do: how many trucks to deploy, where to deploy them, etc. In city limits, those decisions are left to the city.

According to the same Monday night report, the city cut back its apparatus to 18, including Utilities crews, for Tuesday. Twelve were assigned to the Cedar Heights area.

With city officials not granting interviews, they can’t contextualize the reduction, or explain why those Incident Command numbers appear to differ dramatically from the city’s own account of how it deployed its resources.

In Fire Department deployment records obtained by the Independent under the Colorado Open Records Act, the city says it had 32 of its 73 fire apparatus assigned to the fire as early as Saturday afternoon. The number would jump to 43 as of 10:52 a.m. Tuesday — when the city told Cedar Heights and South Mountain Shadows evacuees they could briefly return. The return was cancelled a short time later.

At 1:40 p.m., when the city issued a pre-evacuation notice to north Mountain Shadows and Peregrine, it had cut its assigned units to 40. By 4:30, as fire poured into the city and Bach issued an impromptu evacuation notice during a news briefing, the number was 37. It was bumped back to 43 at 5:15.

But many of those assigned units remained elsewhere, according to GPS coordinates of the apparatus provided by the city. Maps made using the coordinates of the apparatus assigned to the fire at approximately 5:15 p.m. reveal that 12 were east of the interstate, and four more were nowhere near the fire. The same is true of the preceding days.

Calling for backup
In the Denver Post’s July 20 story, federal Type 1 team Incident Commander Rich Harvey said Queens Canyon quickly was identified as a “trigger point” for evacuation.

“If the fire becomes established in there, there is no good containment, no good place for making a stand between Rampart Range Road and Colorado Springs,” Harvey told the Post, adding, “There are no roads, no trails, no natural barriers. That was obvious to us.”

Radio recordings note that at 2:27 p.m., Tuesday, June 26, a firefighter reported flames had caught in Queens Canyon. At 2:40, the same firefighter said there was fire “getting down into the bottom of the canyon.”

Harvey said he didn’t know why the evacuation order wasn’t announced at that point. No one locally has spoken to that issue yet.

On July 16, before city officials stopped talking, Fire Chief Brown stressed to the Independent that evacuations were a city call: “It’s our jurisdiction,” he said. But he didn’t say who actually made the decision.

Brown also said Dubay was his main link to Harvey’s Incident Command team: “Everything that had to do with the city, [Dubay] would call me and say, ‘Here’s what they’re thinking about this, we need resources for this or that.’”

El Paso County Emergency Operations Manager Jim Reid spent 18 hours a day in the command post agency representative room. He says Dubay was at the post, but spent little time in the room.

Monday morning, Reid says, the fire was clearly moving toward the city. “They [Type 1 Incident Command team] focused on Queens Canyon and Cedar Heights pretty strongly,” Reid says in an interview. “Then they pounded Queens Canyon with structure. That would have been a clue that [the city boundary] was an issue, but I can’t speak to what [city officials] thought or knew. I would say Monday would be the time we saw evidence it would cross into the city.

“Not having an agency rep in the room, we didn’t know what the city was doing. I thought they had evacuated on Monday. I remember where Bach came out and said, ‘You gotta get out.’ I thought they were already out.”

Though Mayor Steve Bach said two days before, “This is obviously something beyond the resources of any one agency,” commanders waited until fire poured over ridges onto homes on Tuesday before seeking help from various neighboring departments.

Perhaps those outsiders could’ve helped clear flammable material from houses in harm’s way, or covered Colorado Springs Fire Department stations so more local personnel could head west. But the city isn’t making itself available to explain. Nor is it answering myriad other questions, such as:

Why weren’t more city resources fighting the fire in its early days, or at least mitigating nearby properties?

Why did the city not evacuate north Mountain Shadows and Peregrine residents sooner (“Inside the nightmare,” July 4) — or, as the Denver Post reported Friday, as soon as a predetermined “trigger point” was hit?

In short, was the city prepared for a fire that officials have long predicted was inevitable?

They’re legitimate questions in light of the loss of property and two lives. It’s not unreasonable to think Barbara and William Everett would have survived if
When the flames blew in, the city sought help within a 70-mile radius. But those resources had been available all along under mutual aid agreements among counties and municipalities.

Among the first to get a call on Tuesday, at about 4 p.m., was Falcon Fire Protection District Chief Trent Harwig, who says a city battalion chief asked for “everything you got.”

Falcon sent two engines and seven people: “They wanted us to send more, but we couldn’t,” he says.

They stayed on the fire until July 1, putting in 694 man hours. “The fact is, we’re not going to not respond,” Harwig says. “I mean, if the city is burning up, we’re gonna go.”

Same goes for the Fountain Fire Department, which got a call at 5:37 p.m. and sent one engine, which arrived at the Garden of the Gods Road staging area at 5:53. Fire Chief Darin Anstine says via e-mail.

Pueblo County got a call at 6 p.m. asking for “as many engines as we could send,” says Pueblo County Sheriff public information officer Lisa Shorter. Nine engines and a water tanker truck arrived in Colorado Springs at 11:04 p.m., she says.

Noel Perran, fire chief of the Broadmoor Fire Protection District, had been monitoring the fire with help from a 24/7 sentry posted in The Broadmoor hotel’s tower.

“I saw the pyrocumulus cloud at 4:53 p.m. [Tuesday],” Perran says. “I became very concerned and took a photo of it. I was concerned about what was going on with the top of crowns and it running down into Mountain Shadows.”

At about 7 p.m., he called Springs Fire, offering help. “Five engines, three trucks, they accepted,” he says. A brush truck and foam truck arrived in Mountain Shadows at 8:50. Perran says.

Denver firefighters also came, but Denver officials didn’t return calls for this story.

**Turned away**

Jerry Schnabel wanted to help, too. He’s president of Transit Mix, whose quarry near Cedar Heights was evacuated on Saturday, June 23, by Forest Service workers. The next day, Schnabel returned to the quarry to make sure the equipment — a dozer, two loaders, a grader, water truck and an excavator — was fueled and had keys. He then visited a fire post.

“I told them, ‘If you want this equipment, I’ll have drivers here in 20 minutes,’” he says. At that time, the fire was one canyon and two ridges from his property — a 1,000-yard distance his drivers could traverse in 15 minutes.

“They run that equipment every day,” he says. “They know that terrain. I think they could have made fire breaks better than anyone.”

Schnabel says his employer at the time of the Galena Fire in 1988 in South Dakota that burned 16,788 acres sent four dozers that helped create a fire break.

This time, he says, “[Forestery officials] said we weren’t qualified and didn’t have 40 hours of [firefighting] training.”

While the Forest Service must follow certain rules when it comes to contracting firefighting equipment, the city isn’t under the same restrictions; it could put dozers to work in the city.

One of Schnabel’s vice presidents, Mac Shafer, e-mailed Bach’s office on Sunday with the same offer. Shafer says he got a phone call Monday from a man at the mayor’s office. “He said, ‘We’re evaluating,’ If they needed something, they would be in touch,” he says. “I never heard from them again.”

Later that day, Schnabel went to a news briefing and again offered to use his equipment to work a fire break atop the quarry. He says he received “a very official ‘Thank you, but we don’t need your help.’”

Transit Mix’s chairman had approved use of the equipment, accepting full liability, Schnabel says. “It wasn’t about liability,” he adds, “it’s about, we’ve got a problem here and we’re willing to help.”

He adds that fire personnel could have joined his men in the vehicles’ cabs to act as advisers, if officials desired.

After four rejections, Schnabel assumed commanders had the fire in hand. “These guys are the professionals,” he says. “Our job is to stay out of their way.”

The next day, Schnabel says, he saw police screaming evacuation orders in his Mountain Shadows neighborhood. He lost his home.

“Had they attacked the fire Saturday or Sunday [with his equipment], I think it would have been different,” he says, noting that he knows of others who also offered equipment and were turned down. “By Tuesday morning, it was all over. They had resources they didn’t use.”

**Knowing the score**

Certain city folks are clearly well-equipped to oversee a wildland fire. Dubay has 380 hours of wildland fire training. Battalion Chief Jim Schanel, who led the Mountain Shadows battle, has 500 hours and has fought wildland fires nationwide.

But it’s a different story for Fire Chief Brown and Deputy Fire Chief Tommy Smith, the latter of whom appeared at press briefings and called the Mountain Shadows evacuation “spot on.”

Of Brown’s 1,269 documented training hours since 1993, 45.5, or 3.6 percent, have been labeled wildland fire training. Smith has logged 22.5 hours of such training, or 1.2 percent of his total.

As for emergency exercises, Waters, the Emergency Management director, has been involved in, or led, numerous drills. The city held or participated in 13 drills in 2011, five of which dealt with wildland fire. Three of the exercises were wildfire evacuation drills — in Rockrimmon and Broadmoor Bluffs, and also in Mountain Shadows, where 40 of 54 households included took part.

This year, the city has held four emergency exercises, none involving wildland fire specifically. And as for a full-scale city evacuation plan, officials have been unable to produce one since an Independent request made July 6.

Since taking office in June 2011, Bach has participated in one exercise, called the “Mayor’s Training — Emergency Management,” on Oct. 17, 2011. The other participants were Brown, Waters, Police Chief Pete Carey and Bach’s director of economic vitality and former fire chief Steve Cox, city records show. Records don’t state whether the training involved a wildland fire scenario.

“It’s very important for [elected officials] to understand their role in providing support to the technical staff and also be able to effectively manage the situation,” El Paso County Administrator Jeff Greene says. “When you go through training, you play the role of elected official, of an Incident Commander, how you deal with media, how you make recommendations on allocation of resources. It’s a very detailed process.

“Commissioner [Amy] Lathe was just commenting yesterday, it really influenced her role in this Waldo Canyon event.” Four of five county commissioners have attended FEMA’s Emergency Management Institute in Emmitsburg, Md., he says.

For Bach’s communications director Cindy Aubrey, who attended the Broadmoor Bluffs training in October 2011, the training didn’t initially seem pertinent to her job. “I thought, ‘I’m never going to use it,’” she said last week.

Perhaps it’s all fodder for the “after-action review” planned for days ahead.

“We want to learn all we can from an event like this,” Bach said in the statement issued Friday. “Our dedicated first responders performed superbly. We will continue to look at improving where necessary and building on our strengths.”

— zubeck@csindy.com

**The evac crew**

Just as Incident Command can’t tell local fire departments what to do, it can’t order evacuations within local jurisdictions. Tim Johnsson, public information officer with the federal incident management team, has said that inside city limits, “ultimately, it’s the mayor” who makes an evacuation call.

But under Colorado Springs city code, the fire chief can also order evacuations and is responsible for fire scenes. He or she is even given authority, with the mayor’s approval or his own initiative if the mayor is not present, to order buildings “blown up ... for the purpose of checking the configuration.”

The fire chief also appoints the director of emergency management, who along with the police chief rounds out the quartet empowered by city code to order evacuations. The director of emergency management has responsibility for citywide emergency management activities, and is charged with requesting additional resources from mutual aid jurisdictions, according to code. The director also develops an emergency operations plan.

The city’s most recent Emergency Operations Plan was adopted in 2007, after Emergency Management director Bret Waters stated in a memo to city management: “The EOP defines emergency roles, responsibilities and actions that are necessary for a coordinated and effective response.”

— Pam Zubeck
Misfire

How city leadership left residents — and their heroes — exposed during the Waldo Canyon tragedy

By Pam Zubeck

Dr. Mary Harrow made it out of her neighborhood alive on June 26, no thanks to the city.

Never contacted by police or firefighters even as the Waldo Canyon Fire surged down her street, she blames the man in charge, Mayor Steve Bach. She showed up at an Oct. 24 town hall meeting at Eagleview Middle School to demand his resignation. The crowd of about 200 met her statements with murmurs, then stone silence.

But Harrow won’t quiet down. She lost her house and everything left in it, from one of her pets to her late mom’s wedding ring, in Mountain Shadows that night. And her home on Brogans Bluff Drive was less than a mile away from the Rossmerre Street house where William and Barbara Everett burned to death.

“When I heard those people died, I thought, ‘It’s not just property. That really is a crime,’” Harrow, 52, says in an interview. “There was a false sense of, ‘The government is in control,’ and no, they’re not.”

Indeed, hundreds of documents reviewed by the Independent, and first-hand accounts from those involved, paint a picture of a city that was ill-prepared on that Tuesday afternoon, despite years of warnings, three days of fire nearby, and conspicuous signals of impending disaster.

The city acknowledges some of those signals in its 34-page Initial After Action Report, a self-assessment released Oct. 23. For one thing, the fire had burned erratically since it started June 23. Temperatures were hot, and fuels dry. Other warning signs aren’t mentioned in the report, but already have been established. For instance, as June 26 dawned, the Type 1 team leading the firefighting effort on federal land had dozers cutting a line north from Queens Canyon. Its aircraft were pounding the line with slurry. Firefighters were warned to expect a “red flag” day with gusty winds and thunderstorms.

But there are a lot of things that, as the six-month anniversary of the tragedy approaches, we haven’t been told — and that the city is still choosing not to talk about (see “Making a statement,” p. 22).

For one thing, the feds’ warning on that Tuesday morning drew a specific parallel to June 9, 2002, when the notorious Hayman Fire made a 60,000-acre run north of Lake George in the same Pike National Forest.

For another, Bach’s belief that officials “did everything humanly possible to save what they could” — as he put it at that Oct. 24 town hall meeting — is seriously challenged in reports filed by the men and women who actually fought the blaze. Consider:

• When the fire swept into Mountain Shadows, the city had a mere four firefighting vehicles, or apparatus, assigned to that subdivision and all other land north to the Air Force Academy.

• The evacuation plan had been drafted only that morning, and was enacted minutes before the first homes burned.

• Local firefighters found themselves outgunned, and much of the help from other fire departments was nowhere close, because leaders sought those
resources only after flames came into the city. Their chief staging area wasn’t set up and equipped until houses were ablaze, and they didn’t have a mobile command post until eight hours into Tuesday’s firefight.

- When firefighters tried to reach command or each other, sometimes no one answered. Many weren’t told exactly what to do and, at times, didn’t know who was in charge.
- When additional resources did arrive, some were idled even as personnel amid the firestorm begged for help.
- And, as readily admitted by city firefighters leading efforts on the ground that night (see “Men in the box,” p. 31), the fire could have charged further eastward for miles had it not been for the unanticipated arrival of U.S. Forest Service engines and their hot shot crews.

Men and women on the lines limited the losses at 345 homes and two lives through sheer bravery, skill and dedication. But like Harrow, even they apparently believe they have reason to be angry. And perhaps all of us do.

Heights of protection
CSFD District Chief Randy Royal was first dispatched to the Waldo Canyon Fire at 12:19 p.m., Saturday, June 23, according to his duty report.

He sent two task forces — one with seven apparatus, and one with five — to the gated Cedar Heights development, then ordered a staging area set up at 31st Street and Colorado Avenue. He activated the department’s mobile command unit, and told officials to open the city’s emergency operations center.

Royal advised city Emergency Operations Manager Bret Waters that Cedar Heights should be evacuated, and it was at 1:30 p.m. City records show that an hour later lower Mountain Shadows (south of Chuckwagon Road) was evacuated, too.

As the afternoon went on, the plume moved north and northeast, flames occasionally reaching 150 feet above the treetops, Royal writes. He assigned one of Cedar Heights’ task forces to the Queens Canyon area, including the historic Glen Eyrie estate, where firefighters removed flammable materials and otherwise miti-
Tuesday, the U.S. Forest Service said weather conditions mirrored those of the Hayman Fire’s worst day. Sure enough, the Waldo fire grew from 4,500 to 15,622 acres on Tuesday, including 1,516 acres within city limits.

gated fire risks, including closing windows and curtains and removing brush around buildings. (Later that night, the Forest Service would arrive to help there, too.) Lastly, Royal sent a third task force of two engines and two brush trucks to lower Mountain Shadows.

The deployments quickly tapped out the departments from Stratmoor Hills, Cheyenne Mountain Air Force Station, Cimarron Hills and Peterson Air Force Base to fill four city stations on Saturday. Three more were left empty.

As the city deployed its resources on Saturday, Colorado Springs Utilities’ Catamount Wildland Fire Team began to cut a firebreak above Cedar Heights, an effort that would continue in the following days. In Cedar Heights itself, firefighters patrolled, watched for flying sparks, mopped the dozer line, and mitigated around homes, as explains Engine 20’s Company Officer Aaron McConnellogue.

“We prepared every home located on 3 Graces Dr and Old Scotchman Way,” he notes in his report. “Entry was made into almost every home by way of unlocked doors. Tasks performed were exterior removal of low lying ladder fuels, Lp Gas [propane] bottles moved to the street, firewood and patio furniture moved from decks, interior prep consisted of closing all doors and windows, dropping all blinds, and closing windows coverings."

For days, Cedar Heights, whose 183 single-family homes bear an assessed average value of $340,000, was given high-priority treatment. A total of 14 Springs firefighters, who usually work for the Forest Service, who use pulaski tools, chain saws and other equipment to inhibit advance of a wildland fire.

Heavy rescue: A firefighting vehicle equipped with rescue equipment for extrication of people from vehicles or rescues from heights, such as Garden of the Gods rocks.

Hot shot crew: A ground crew of 20 firefighters, who usually work for the Forest Service, who use pulaski tools, chain saws and other equipment to inhibit advance of a wildland fire.

ICP: Incident Command Post, the hub from which a firefighting effort is directed, containing commanders, weather forecasters, logistics experts and the like.

Pyrocumulus cloud: A cloud that builds over a fire and contains a collection of particulates and moisture released by burning fuels. Such clouds can dissipate or collapse if they become too heavy.

Strike team: A team composed of resources of the same type, assembled to meet a tactical objective with common communications and leadership. Typically, a strike team is four or more resources.

Task force: A team composed of resources of different types, assembled to meet a tactical objective with common communications and leadership. Typically, a task force also contains four or more resources.

Type 1 engine: A firefighting vehicle that carries 200 to 300 gallons of water, plus hoses and tools. It’s often used to fight wildland fires, and is labeled with a “B,” paired with the fire station number where it’s based.

Type 1 team: The federal Forest Service’s most elite and highly trained firefighting team, assigned to the most complex incidents. The team consists of an incident commander and experts in weather forecasting, logistics, finances, communications and firefighting. While the team and engine share the Type 1 name, there’s no direct connection between them.

Wildland engine: A vehicle that can carry up to 500 gallons of water and firefighting tools and, due to a shorter wheel base, can go off-road. It’s typically called a Type 3 engine and is named “WL” followed by the station number.

— Compiled by Pam Zubeck
Early in the firefight, the need was obvious: The fire crawled to the western edge of Cedar Heights by Sunday night or Monday morning, where the dozer line played a key role in holding the flames at bay. But it’s striking that no fewer than 11 apparatuses were on duty in Cedar Heights daily for the first eight days of the fire, including most of Tuesday — and that only well after Mountain Shadows’ homes caught fire were some units redirected.

Bach explained the dedication to Cedar Heights this way at an Oct. 23 news conference: “Cedar Heights is the poster child for the Waldo Canyon Fire. We honestly thought that first afternoon Cedar Heights was gonna go, because the winds were strong. Even though the people of Cedar Heights over the last three years with the Fire Department had done a lot of mitigation, there was real concern the Cedar Heights homes would all be gone. The winds shifted and went the other way.”

‘Crazy conditions’

Harrow would have been happy to have seen firefighters in her neighborhood Tuesday morning.

“If somebody said, ‘We have to cut all your trees down to save your house,’ I would say, ‘Give me a chain saw,’” she says. “The winds are going to shift against you today.”

As it happens, one of Harrow’s patients at her medical practice is a firefighter. That morning, she says, that firefighter told her, “The winds are going to shift against you today.”

Harrow worked late the night before, she decided at about 2 to take a nap.

Unbeknownst to her, a strange morning in the field was turning into a scary afternoon.

It began with the Type 1 team’s 6 a.m. briefing at the Incident Command Post (ICP) at Holmes Middle School. There, writes Colorado Springs Utilities wildland team chief Mike Myers, “...we were told by the Fire Behavior Analyst that the day’s conditions would be exactly the same as the day the Hayman fire blew up. This was communicated to the crews for heightened awareness of the expected fire behavior.”

The Forest Service action plan for that day reported a Haines index — a measure of rapid forest-fire growth potential — of 6, the highest possible. The report predicted “stormers with little rain and gusty outflow winds” and noted “late morning cumulus forming.” Meanwhile, an earlier Forest Service report had set the moisture content of 1,000-hour fuels (dead tree trunks and branches 3 to 9 inches in diameter) at a mere 5 percent to 6 percent. Fine dead fuels, those up to a half-inch in diameter, were at 2 percent.

Darrell Schulte of Montana says such “crazy, unbelievably dry” conditions can complicate efforts to predict what a fire might do, especially if gusty winds and steep slopes are in play. A 27-year wildland fire and fuels manager with the Forest Service, Schulte is a fire behavior and planning instructor, and consultant who forecasted weather for the 2011 Texas wildfires.

After reviewing the Forest Service’s Waldo action plans, weather and fuels reports, and terrain, Schulte says, “I would expect the unexpected. Any of those canyons could bring it into town,” especially considering the pyrocumulus cloud column that was forming (see “Inside the nightmare,” News, July 4).

Harrow would have been happy to have seen firefighters in her neighborhood Tuesday morning. At 3:45 on the 26th, Myers notes in his report, “Air Attack Supervisor reported fire in Queens Creek,” at the bottom of Queens Canyon. If, as Bach and Fire Chief Rich Brown have publicly asserted in recent months, they were to be evacuated when fire entered lower Mountain Shadows or topped Queens Canyon’s east ridge, points that would “allow CSPD approximately 3 to 4 hours to complete evacuations.”

Bach has said that Forest Supervisor Jerri Marr and Harvey told the city it would have four to five hours’ notice for an evacuation. Marr won’t discuss the matter, brushing aside questions during a Nov. 10 restoration event at the Flying W Ranch burn site.

“We can only about what all day long, [about] what happened,” she says. “But we need to focus on going forward.”

At 3:45 on the 26th, Myers notes in his report, “Air Attack Supervisor reported fire in Queens Creek,” at the bottom of Queens Canyon. Eight minutes later, the lookout reports “fire in Queen’s Canyon and the winds picking up drastically.”

Still, no evacuation order came. Those authorized to issue such orders include Bach, Brown, Waters and Police Chief Pete Carey.

Sheer panic

At the 4 p.m. news briefing, Harvey sounded nervous.

“It is pretty daunting out there,” he said. “We focused our efforts earlier today on trying to keep the fire on that Rampart Ridge [sic] Road. Earlier this afternoon, it became established in Queens Canyon on the other side, the east side of Rampart Ridge [sic] Road. The activity you see behind us now is the fire moving to the north up Queens Canyon and slightly to the east with topography as it comes out of Queens Canyon. So, we’re

All eyes on Queens

Capt. Steve Riker, a heavy rescue expert with no current wildland certification, was in charge of the city’s deployed resources on Tuesday. In his report, the 28-year CSFD veteran says in the “early afternoon” he observed the fire “working its way to the west side of what I believed to be the west rim of Queens Canyon.”

By 3 p.m., a member of Myers’ wildland crew, serving as lookout on a ridge, reported a “noticeable change in weather.” Meanwhile, sometime between then and 3:30, Angela Gonzalez walked out of her mom’s house a few blocks east of her own home on Linger Way, just north of Chuckwagon.

“The very top of the ridge was in flames,” she says. “There weren’t any firefighters or helicopters. It was burning. You could smell the trees on fire. I couldn’t move. I didn’t believe what I was seeing.”

She grabbed her kids, ages 2 and 4, and headed home to get her husband. By the time she got there, “The backyard was on fire.”

According to Riker’s report, two task forces reported seeing cold ash fall around them at around 3 or 3:30. After that, he spoke with District Chief Mike Gower about how many resources were available and conferred with Battalion Chief Ted Collas in the ICP about evacuation decision points — places where, when fire was observed, evacuations would be ordered.

A city outline of evacuation trigger points, provided to the Indy in response to a records request, states that upper Mountain Shadows, Oak Valley and Peregrine were to be evacuated when fire entered lower Mountain Shadows or topped Queens Canyon’s east ridge, points that would “allow CSPD approximately 3 to 4 hours to complete evacuations”.

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quite a bit concerned about that. ... It has been a challenge in the wind, especially in Queens Canyon, the wind, the fuels, the terrain of the lines really giving us problems.”

As the minutes ticked by, Riker had driven more than four miles to Allegheny Drive. There he reported fire “jumping (spotting) to the north one hundred yards at a time and then back filling, heading towards the Air Force Academy,” and a helicopter pilot “waving at us to get out of the area.”

At that point, the city determined “the decision point had been met,” Riker reports. At 4:21, as smoke billowed in the distance, Bach interrupted the news conference with the evacuation order.

Three days before, 50 police officers had helped firefighters carry out smooth, three-hour evacuations in Cedar Heights and lower Mountain Shadows, according to Police Lt. Sean Mandel. The next day, Mandel states, 10 police officers and two sergeants returned to lower Mountain Shadows to complete “double checks.” They worked methodically from top to bottom in Cedar Heights, knocking on doors, duty reports say.

By contrast, what happened in upper Mountain Shadows — as best it can be reconstructed using personal accounts, duty reports, other documents and even YouTube videos — was bedlam. As Gonzalez fled with her family, she witnessed “a flood of police cars” enter the subdivision, along with residents. Sixty on-duty police officers raced to carry out a plan that their supervisors had devised just hours before, according to the city’s aforementioned outline of evacuation trigger points. That plan called for officers to work from west to east, “ensuring that no ger points. That plan called for officers to work from west to east, “ensuring that no structures have been overlooked or missed being contacted.” If anyone refused to evacuate, police were to report the address and number of people there.

Starting at 4:45 p.m., fire apparatus raced to the subdivision from miles away in the city. But as they started arriving, they encountered roads jammed with 26,000 evacuees.

Some firefighters were diverted to help them. District Chief Troy Branham writes that he “assisted with immediate evacuations of individuals still in the area as the fire was racing down into the mountain shadows subdivision.”

Riker notes he was ordered “to assist any civilians” trying to escape, but also that “There were residents that would pass us along the road, and not paying any mind to our cries for them to stay out of the neighborhood, as they were trying to get to their houses.”

Task Force Leader Lt. Steve Wilch writes that firefighters were assigned to investigate “numerous reports of trapped residents,” all of which turned out false. Just as firefighters arrived in the subdivision, according to Myers, Riker ordered them to pull back as the pyrocumulus cloud had collapsed and pushed the fire with 65 mph winds. “Because of the extreme weather conditions, extreme fire behavior and very high downslope winds,” reports the city in its evacuation outline, “the fire moved much more rapidly into the City than the city’s fire behavior models had predicted.”

Firefighters first were ordered to Chipeta Elementary off Flying W Ranch Road, but due to a “large wall of flames” heading for the school, Myers says, were ordered to pull back a second time to 30th Street and Garden of the Gods Road, which then became the staging area for the night.

The cops, however, apparently weren’t told to pull back, according to one source who was there that day and another who has talked with cops who were. (They spoke with the Indy on the condition of anonymity.) Asked by e-mail about this assertion, Police Chief Pete Carey did not respond.

Officer Pete Tomitsch, in his account displayed at the Colorado Springs Together office, writes that he first used garden hoses, then an ax and a shovel, to put out fires. “In more than 45 minutes, I had not observed any person,” he writes. “The neighborhoods were deserted. No people, no cars, no signs of life, except for deer running from the fire.”

On Brogans Bluff, Harrow was still sleeping. She hadn’t registered her cell phone with the E911 Authority, but might not have been notified anyway. City officials have acknowledged the phone system was overwhelmed and thousands of reverse-911 calls simply weren’t made as they should have been.

“It was about 5:30 when I woke up because the windows were rattling,” she says. “I thought I better check on that fire.” When she went outside, she saw houses burning on her street. The smoke was so thick, she had trouble breathing. Knowing she’d need clothes to wear, she grabbed laundry from the dryer, then found one of her two cats. Upon fleecing, she got to Wilson and Flying W Ranch roads, where she saw nine fire trucks lined up: “I thought, ‘Hey, there’s a fire hydrant 10 feet from my house. You’re in the wrong place.’”

Answering the call

CSFD Capt. Michael Wittry had already moved his logistics base, the department’s only source for supplies, twice before setting up at Coronado High School at 6 a.m. Tuesday, When the fire blew up that afternoon, things got confusing again.

“Staging is at Station 9,” was announced by unknown party,” Wittry writes. “Captain Wittry tried multiple times to get-per...
mission or orders to move to that location. Getting no answer, he made the decision to move himself to Station 9. He did not have resources to move the entire staging operation that was already set up at Coronado [sic], which included power, Internet access, food and water supplies."

Station 9 is at 622 W. Garden of the Gods Road. Wittry reports that he met up with Fire Marshal Brett Lacey and was told “there had been a call back of all personnel and they would begin to arrive shortly.” Although the city had days to plan for a major campaign, Wittry writes that “Plans were quickly sketched out for how to manage the arrival of 150 firefighters. Supplies for staging at this point consisted of a [sic] pens and pads of paper. Fire Marshal Lacey was then directed to another assignment.”

But Wittry and others pulled it off, the staging area becoming “more robust as time and labor became more available.” To accommodate dozens of engines flooding in from surrounding areas and other Springs stations, “Capt. Wittry made the decision to occupy and utilize the parking area of the commercial occupancy (Factory Appliance Outlet) adjacent to Station 9 as a staging and rotation platform. No permission was asked or received for this use.”

One thing logistics doesn’t handle is medical support. There was no area set up for this until Company Officer Robert Coffey was asked via cell phone at 5:15 p.m. to report to duty, after which Deputy Chief Tommy Smith assigned him to set up a medical area at Station 9, Coffey’s report states.

Coffey set to work coordinating two city medical units with American Medical Response, the emergency ambulance provider, to evacuate Mount St. Francis Nursing Center. He also made sure the city had emergency medical coverage; staffed Station 9’s medical/rehab unit to evaluate firefighters for fatigue, illness and injuries; and retrieved the mass casualty trailer from Station 19 at 2490 Research Pkwy., all by 6:30.

Coffey also worked to find space for his colleagues to rest. Sources say some firefighters slept on the asphalt at Station 9 until quarters could be secured at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs dormitories on June 28.

Wittry and Coffey’s efforts are notable, because Station 9 is tightly flanked on one side by a business and the other by a road. A railroad track runs behind it. Setting up a full-fledged fire camp with space for rest, food distribution and medical services would be like setting up a used car lot in your driveway.

Chaos on the line

Wittry and Coffey weren’t the only ones given nearly impossible tasks. When Tuesday started, Riker had six apparatus to cover the 10-mile western border of the city from the Air Force Academy to Highway 24.

He assigned one engine and one smaller wildland engine to cover the area west of Centennial Boulevard and Vindicator Drive north to the Air Force Academy. He sent two Utility brush trucks, glorified pickup trucks with water and a pump, led by nine-year team member Myers, to provide structure protection for everything from 30th Street and Garden of the Gods Road west to Rampart Range Road and south to Highway 24. Finally, he sent another wildland engine and a brush truck to provide structure protection to the entire upper and lower Mountain Shadows area.

After the ominous morning briefing, Riker’s resources didn’t change. Not until 4:11 did city officials seek help from Denver fire departments, some of which already were on the fire as requested by Harvey’s team. Around 4:30, Riker asked for more engines; a dozen CSFD apparatus were dispatched by 4:45, some coming from as far away as Jet Wing Drive and Tutt Boulevard. (At 5:21 p.m., El Paso County put out an all-county page for extra resources for the city; units came from Fountain, Calhan, Stratmoor Hills, Fort Carson, Black Forest, Security,

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Pueblo, Tri-County and Eliott, county records show.

As for Station 18, located on Mountain Shadows’ north end, its personnel had been sitting at quarters all day. The crew reported “flames on Front Range ridge top behind Station 18 with spotting 1/3… the way down the mountain” at 4:10 p.m., and was dispatched 35 minutes later to Chuckwagon and Flying W Ranch roads. The crew at Station 12, 445 W. Rockrimmon Blvd., watched another engine whiz by with lights and sirens, prompting Capt. Kathleen MacLaren to ask dispatch if her company was shown as available. “At [4:45], we were then tapped out to a grass fire call,” she reports.

MacLaren’s report goes on to say, “To my recollection, we were not advised who command was. However, it was obvious that Acting Chief Riker was the strike team leader. Later, he began answering as command. I did not hear command named or located. After several hours, I did not hear Chief Riker responding as command.”

MacLaren, who’s been with CSFD for 15 years, also reports that “No strategy was declared.” While some units were bringing 1.5-inch hoses toward structures in the early stages of the firefight, she reports that her engine, E56, didn’t: “It was not advised due to the massive wave of flames rolling toward the area.” Paramedic Alexandra Del Gaudio reports that the crew of Brush Truck 18 was “compelled to break lines,” leaving even their hoses behind, to avoid the advancing firestorm.

At least a half dozen firefighters describe moving from one assignment to the next in Tuesday night’s early stages without knowing an overall plan. But even as they got over the initial confusion and were sent back into Mountain Shadows for the long haul, they encountered organizational surprises. Engine 18, for example, reports it came upon two engines from Highway 115 Fire District “that were lost.”

“They attached themselves to us,” the crew reports. Engine 18 first helped MacLaren’s task force make a stand on Flying W Ranch Road east of Ashton Park Place. District Chief Lawrence Schwarz then directed it to put out a roof fire on Rossmere and Ashton Park. After that, Battalion Chief Jim Schanel directed the crew to hose down backyards, and put out a roof fire, on Rossmere.

Heavy Rescue 17, responding from a prior medical call at Rockrimmon Boulevard and Woodmen Road, was ready to help. But it sat idle at the 30th Street staging area for an unknown length of time, along with three other apparatus, until one of its members, unable to reach anyone by radio, literally walked to the command post to announce the company was there.

Eventually, Tiffany Square on Corporate Drive was designated a staging point for incoming Denver units. But Royal notes he received “reports of other out of town companies going directly into the fire area without checking in with command or staging.”

And because the department hadn’t made maps in advance for out-of-town engines, crew’s like Company Officer P.J. Langmaid’s were told to “split all our companies and place one member on each Denver Fire rig as a point of contact and communications/operations liaison.” But as he notes, that strategy didn’t last. “This plan changes when resources from Cedar Heights arrive,” he writes.

Company Officer Matthew Clark, assigned to oversee three task forces in Cedar Heights, reports he made “numerous calls” to the Fire Department Operations Center seeking permission to go to Mountain Shadows after the fire blew into the city. But he didn’t get permission to move until 8 P.M., according to Engine 13 Company Officer John Aker Jr., who served with Clark. And the crews didn’t head for Tiffany Square until an hour later.

When they finally arrived, “they remained in staging for approximately 1.5 hours,” Aker writes.

Back at 30th Street, Riker reports, he, Gower and Myers tracked units using dry-erase markers on a map taped to the hood of Myers’ Chevy Tahoe. “At times, the map was filled with writing,” Riker writes, “and units had to be tracked by writing on the sides of the hood.” They had no command post until after midnight, when the police department’s command post was delivered to them. “Its lack of work space did not allow us to function in a coordinated manner, so the CSFD command vehicle was sent to our location,” Riker writes.

“It was not requested earlier,” he adds, “because we thought it was still out of service for a [sic] electrical and air conditioner problems that took it out of service on Saturday, the 24th.” The command vehicle rolled up at 1:30 a.m.

Singular city

There’s an element of irony in Colorado Springs eventually relying upon three dozen fire departments to help respond to the Waldo Canyon Fire: When the fire broke out on federal land, city leaders sometimes showed little interest in cooperation.

Then-County Attorney Bill Louis says Saturday night, county officials and state Rep. Bob Gardner gathered in Green Mountain Falls to sign a delegation of authority that would enable state and federal agencies to pick up the tab for local-jurisdiction firefighting efforts on state and federal lands. The city was invited to sign it. “They specifically refused,” Louis says.

The next day, the city did sign its own delegation of authority — but apparently made it clear its fire personnel would remain separate from Harvey’s team, which arrived Sunday night. In a July 16 interview, Brown said he specified in the city’s delegation of authority that the city, and no one else, would have control if the fire crossed into Colorado Springs.

Brown said that he insisted to the ICP, “You’re not going to run the fire once it comes into the city.” Records show that city resources throughout were dispatched by fire headquarters on Printers Parkway,
not the ICP at Holmes Middle School. Brown didn’t have a day-to-day presence at the ICP; instead, he and other city officials relied on reports delivered daily in person by Deputy Chief Steve Dubay to three different sites in the city, including fire headquarters.

In addition, Dubay notes in his report that he told Harvey’s operations chief on Sunday that he, Dubay, would be responsible for CSFD resources, and that they weren’t subject to assignment by the Incident Management Team.

City assignments placed excruciating demands on some firefighters. According to the duty reports, one chief got an hour and 15 minutes between duty assignments. Two crews relieved at 2 a.m. Tuesday were ordered back to duty five hours later. Company Officer Carrick Patterson expressed “safety concerns” after he pulled a 36-hour shift starting at 7 a.m. Wednesday, during which he oversaw 12 different crews on six apparatus. Six firefighters suffered minor injuries, and 52 firefighters suffered six apparatus. Six different crews on which he oversaw 12 different crews on six apparatus. Six firefighters suffered minor injuries, and 52 firefighters were sent home due to fatigue.

The International Association of Firefighters Local 5 has presented Brown with a list of 15 “concerns,” most of which deal with the Waldo fire, sources close to Local 5 say. The city refuses to release the document, instead issuing the Indy an affidavit signed by Brown on Oct. 16 saying, “This list is a one page document that describes employees’ candid opinions about Fire Department issues and/or suggestions/recommendations as to how CSFD may improve in these particular areas.”

Disclosure, he says, “will cause substantial injury to the public interest as it will have a chilling effect on the predecisional and deliberative process” by discouraging employees from sharing candid opinions with management.

Not coming back
As adamant as the city was that its personnel operate independently during the fire, it looks equally

About the duty reports

By Pam Zubeck

Portions of our stories this week are based on 116 duty reports spanning 227 pages filed by Colorado Springs Fire Department firefighters who worked the Waldo Canyon Fire. The Independent obtained the reports under the Colorado Open Records Act, and they were provided in several phases as they were filed over a three-month period.

Every fire company assigned to an apparatus is expected to report on any incident to which it’s been dispatched, according to Deputy Chief Steve Dubay. The report is designed to document what happened when, and who was involved. Data include dispatch and arrival times; weather conditions; which firefighters were on board; and what actions were taken.

Reports for the Waldo Canyon Fire weren’t required to be filed at the end of shift, as is usually the case. Rather, the deadline was Sept. 30, so firefighters had “an opportunity to get their thoughts right,” as put by Dubay in an Aug. 22 interview.

The Fire Department decided to have firefighters report under two separate incident numbers. The first was for the Cedar Heights call-out June 23, for which 38 reports were filed. The second was for June 26 when the homes burned, for which 47 reports were filed.

Nothing that happened Sunday, June 24, or Monday, June 25, was considered a separate incident, according to Dubay, so reports for those days weren’t required. “They don’t have to write a report for every time they move,” he said.

Still, 10 firefighters filed reports for Sunday, a day during which 23 apparatus were dispatched to Cedar Heights, and three filed reports for Monday, when 11 apparatus were on duty in Cedar Heights and four in Mountain Shadows. The city also provided 10 reports for Wednesday, and eight for the four days that followed.

The 116 reports vary dramatically. District chiefs tend to report events in great detail, noting which trucks and engines did what and strategic maneuvers, among other things. Some others’ reports are so brief as to be almost meaningless.

For example, Brush Truck 12 is reported to have responded from an “unknown” location Sunday, June 24, and stayed on duty until July 1. The narrative states: “It is unknown who was on this vehicle. It was deployed for over a week with different people on it. It was at Cedar Heights on structure protection — no action taken. It was in Mt Shadows — unknown action taken. It was in Peregrine — unknown tasks performed.”

Nevertheless, most reports describe company actions, in often-compelling ways, that have allowed the Independent to reconstruct the city’s fire response. As we’ve done so, we’ve attempted to highlight details that speak to themes seen throughout the reports.

— zubeck@csindy.com
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Floyd D. Tunson, Untitled 96 (version 1) (detail) 2005, Mixed media, 48 x 48 inches

adament now that its personnel alone examine the response. No third party has been engaged to review the city’s performance, which often is requested when a fire kills people.

“I would think that an ‘outside’ opinion of the way the fire was handled would be valuable to the entities, because it would most likely be less biased by internal politics, etc.” Schulte, the Montana consultant, says via e-mail.

Gordon Routley, a former fire chief and consultant who’s investigated high-profile fatal fires, says the problem with internal reviews is, “Everybody is looking to cover their ass.”

It’s worth noting that Routley helped investigate a 2007 fire in Charleston, S.C., that killed nine firefighters. The investigation linked the deaths to lack of strategy, command problems and a lack of “accountability” of firefighters.

In firefighting terms, accountability means tracking who’s doing what on a fire. If a crew doesn’t check in or out, it’s impossible to know who’s on the fire line, and who might be missing due to injury.

While some of Tuesday night’s accountability issues may be understandable, even predictable, CSFD was struggling with this even early Sunday morning in Cedar Heights. Just before midnight, Company Officer David Broch responded as the “accountability officer” there, and soon found that “staffing levels were off from what was thought to have been on the fire. Some crew members did not swap out in the morning which left more crew members on the fire than the crew swap planned for. This was unsafe and unnecessary and reported to the [CSFD headquarters].”

Perhaps a third party would identify accountability as one of the “weaknesses of the system that could be addressed,” as Routley puts it. Perhaps it would disagree with the city’s Initial After Action Report assessment that city “strengths” included collaboration between police and fire officials, the evacuation and planning. Either way, a nationally known, top-tier investigator could give an in-depth assessment for somewhere between $60,000 and a few hundred thousand dollars, according to Christine Meier, executive director of strategic planning for the National Association of Fire Investigators.

No government official or agency, however, appears interested.

So at least until the city’s final After Action Report comes out next year, the focus will likely remain on rebuilding homes and restoring the forest. Officials and residents alike will, naturally, continue to celebrate many of the small steps in bringing Mountain Shadows back to health.

Still, William and Barbara Everett won’t be coming back. In fact their deaths have largely been ignored: no funeral coverage in the media, no public talk of, say, naming a park in their honor. Even the city’s report doesn’t name them, referring only once to “two fatalities.”

Perhaps that’s because not much is known about William, a 74-year-old Vietnam veteran, who lived at 2900 Rossmere St. with his 73-year-old wife. William’s brother, John, isn’t giving interviews.

But what is known is that they planned to flee that afternoon.

“Investigative information indicates that the decedent and his wife called a relative from their home,” the El Paso County Coroner’s Office report states, “indicating that they were in the process of evacuating their house shortly before the home caught fire.”

Both died from “thermal injuries and smoke inhalation,” the coroner’s office ruled. In starker terms: When fire overtook their house, it likely was 1,100 degrees or hotter, and pitch black with smoke. They would have felt their skin melting and fusing with their clothing, their lungs searing.

Dr. Harrow drove near their house as she fled that day. “If I had known they were there, I could have stopped to help them,” she says.

The tragedy left Harrow with a bitter lesson. “You can’t sit back and expect the government to save your ass,” she says.

“You’re on your own, baby.”

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The Everett’s are buried here at Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver.
Up the ladder

How leadership works within Springs Fire Department management

Fire chief
Rich Brown

Deputy chief
Steve Dubay

Deputy chief
Tommy Smith

10-11 Battalion/District chiefs
Includes Jim Schanel, Randy Royal, Troy Branham and Lawrence Schwarz

Incident management

Under CSFD policy, “District Chiefs shall assume/establish Command for all second-alarm and greater incidents.” Operating as incident commander, a district chief then may select someone as an operations chief. Moving down the ladder from there, you might find branch directors, then division supervisors.

In large incidents, task forces and strike teams may be formed. Task force leaders may report directly to the incident commander or to a division supervisor; strike team leaders generally report to a division supervisor.

— Compiled by Pam Zubeck
**Fire proof**

Two agencies endorse an outside investigation of how the Waldo Canyon Fire was fought

By Pam Zubeck

Just as the Waldo Canyon Fire pushed toward Colorado Springs city limits on Tuesday, June 26, two tanker planes that had been bombarding the western border of the city with slurry flew off to another fire, El Paso County Sheriff Terry Maketa says.

Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper is on board, too, says director of communications Eric Brown via e-mail: “We’d support a third-party review.” Mayor Steve Bach, though, isn’t biting. And City Council President Scott Hente is only mildly interested, saying, “Can little ol’ Colorado Springs effect a change on the federal level?”

**California critiques**

The Waldo fire, which started June 23 in the Pike and San Isabel National Forests, burned more than 18,000 acres, killed two people and destroyed 345 homes inside the city, making it the most destructive fire in Colorado history.

The city’s response to the fire is detailed in the Independent’s cover story, “Misfire,” published Dec. 12. Based on a five-month investigation centering on firefighter duty reports and other documents and interviews, the report found the city was ill-prepared, evacuated people too late, and placed residents and firefighters at risk due to poor planning and organization. It also points out that the city’s Initial After Action Report fails to substantially acknowledge many of these problems.

Bach has ordered outside reviews of other issues, including allegations of financial impropriety raised by former city finance director Terri Velasquez. (The report cost $65,000 and exonerated the city.)

But when asked about a third-party review of the fire, Bach issued a statement saying, “The City continues working on the After Action Review of the Waldo Canyon Fire which will be completed by end of first quarter next year. I am satisfied with the process thus far.”

Another review is underway at the federal level, but it’s limited to forestry issues related to the fire. Asked about a firefighting review, U.S. Sen. Mark Udall’s office declined to comment. Pike and San Isabel National Forests supervisor Jerri Marr didn’t respond to requests for comment, and U.S. Rep. Doug Lamborn “has no opinion,” his spokesperson says.

Independent after-action reviews are routine in California, where wildland fires are commonplace and deadly.

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