

SUNDAY

MARCH 11, 2007

Big 12 tournament

Texas holds off OSU to reach final vs. Kansas Jayhawks

SPORTS

Girls going ga-ga over princesses

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San Antonio Express-News

Metro Edition

www.MySanAntonio.com

THE VOICE OF SOUTH TEXAS SINCE 1865

This mansion in the exclusive Dominion subdivision caught fire Jan. 25. It took firefighters 8.5 minutes to get there. When it was over, \$900,000 was up in smoke.



CAUSE FOR ALARM

- 18 fire stations outside Loop 410
- 31 fire stations in the inner city
- 40 percent of fires outside the loop were reached within 5 minutes
- 70 percent of fires inside the loop were reached within 5 minutes

By JOHN TEDESCO, KARISA KING AND KELLY GUCKIAN
EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITERS

As flames shot through the roof of Barbara Garrow's vacant \$250,000 home on the outskirts of San Antonio, worried onlookers stood in the front yard, asking themselves the same question.

Where was the Fire Department?

"I was just surprised it took them as long as it did," recalled neighbor Philip Townsend, a former juvenile probation officer who lives in the hilly community of Stone Oak on the far North Side.

Neighbors were right to be concerned. In about the time it takes to get up during a commercial break and grab a snack, a flame on a couch can grow into an inferno and "flashover," the point when everything in

See SOME/19A

INSIDE

Fatal fires show worrisome trend

Most victims die in homes lacking smoke detectors and not from slow fire response time. 21A

>> MYSA.COM

Keyword: Metro
For videos on how quickly a fire can spread.

Child-death suspects are nabbed

DA planning to seek the ultimate punishment for mother of the slain siblings.

By BRIAN CHASNOFF
EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITER

Valerie Lopez on Christmas Eve beat her 14-month-old daughter to death, hid the body beneath their South Side apartment and two months later added the body of her infant son, officials said Saturday.

Yet, the young mother's life at 1302 W. Winnipeg Ave. assumed a predictable, occasionally joyful pattern as the weeks turned to months and a stench began to settle around the triplex.

She baked a birthday cake in January for her live-in boyfriend, Jerry Salazar, and hosted a party in the room above her daughter's decomposing body. On Valentine's Day, she brought him fresh roses and a box of chocolates, later joining guests for a barbecue get-together in the triplex's front yard.

A dead animal, the couple claimed, was stinking up the property. They told friends the children were staying with their grandmother.

"It didn't seem like it bothered her or him," said Tony Serenil, 41, a tenant at the triplex

See MOM/22A



PHOTOS BY BOB OWEN/STAFF

Police Chief William McManus follows arrested Valerie Lopez.



Jerry Salazar is a second suspect in the death of Lopez's two children.



Did you remember to spring forward?

Daylight-saving time started three weeks early this year, so be sure you set your clocks ahead by one hour. Daylight time will last until Nov. 4.

Fear of kidnapping is holding many folks in Mexico hostage

>> MYSA.COM

By DANE SCHILLER
EXPRESS-NEWS MEXICO BUREAU CHIEF

Keyword: Mexico
For audio and transcripts in English and Spanish of a call between a kidnapper and a victim's sister.

MEXICO CITY — Scared, disoriented and without a penny in his pocket, Pedro Fletes staggered slightly as he got out of the car.

His blindfold suddenly yanked off, he struggled to keep his eyes from blinking. For the past two months, he hadn't been allowed to walk or see the sun.

He followed his captor's command: "I am going to let

you go, and you walk 100 meters. If you turn around or open your eyes, I will shoot you."

Fletes, the director of a private school, finally was free, his ransom paid. He had no idea where he was — some unfamiliar street in one of the city's sprawling slums — or where he had been.

For the past two months, he was held inside a closet, blindfolded, tethered to a wall

See KIDNAPPING/17A



Big Bopper answers

History, science and a son's quest solve how J.P. Richardson — the Big Bopper — died 48 years ago, along with rock stars Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens.

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TYC's rapid expansion called 'formula for chaos'

Buildup leading to crisis started with Bush get-tough promise.

By R.G. RATCLIFFE
AUSTIN BUREAU

AUSTIN — The roots of the current crisis at the Texas Youth Commission go back a dozen years to a campaign commercial that featured a threatening handgun and a somber-

voiced announcer telling Texans that "violent juvenile crime is up."

Getting tough on juvenile crime was one of the cornerstones of the campaign that elected George W. Bush governor in 1994, and he fulfilled that promise by almost tripling the size of the state's youth corrections system.

"The bottom line is young people need to understand there will be severe consequences for

See TYC/21A

Today's Weather
Chance of storms
High 71, Low 61
Full report, Page 16C

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Some homeowners feel shorted on fire service

CONTINUED FROM 1A

the room ignites. Temperatures can reach 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit — hotter than the surface of Venus.

The first company of firefighters reached Garrow's house eight minutes and seven seconds after hearing the alarm — longer than a five-minute standard recommended by safety experts. The new brick home was lost.

The fire didn't harm anyone on that spring night in April 2005, and there's no telling if the house could have been saved.

But the sluggish response near the city limits was no anomaly.

City records show the Fire Department's mission of protecting lives and property is clashing with San Antonio's appetite for new land.

In the past six years, firefighters rushed to inner-city blazes far more quickly than to fires in popular outlying areas that attract thousands of new homeowners.

Delays on the city's edges plague rich and poor alike, from the exclusive enclave of the Dominion to low-income neighborhoods like Sunrise, a struggling community on the far East Side.

San Antonio annexed many of these neighborhoods despite protests by residents, who complained the city would fail to provide swift fire protection.

The city's own records reveal that most of the time, those fears came true.

The Fire Department tallies the response time to every structure fire down to the minute and second, and stores the information in a database. The San Antonio Express-News obtained a copy of those electronic records by filing an open records request under the Texas Public Information Act.

The newspaper's review of the database reveals stark disparities in fire protection across the city.

In the 78258 ZIP code that blankets Stone Oak, which was annexed amid protests by residents in December 1997, firefighters responded to 65 structure fires in the past six years. They mobilized and drove to those blazes in five minutes or less only 18 percent of the time.

The goal is 90 percent. By contrast, residents living in the West Side ZIP code of 78207 near downtown enjoy excellent fire protection. Firefighters responded to more than 450 fires, the most of any ZIP code, and reached the blazes in five minutes or less 88 percent of the time.

Why the difference? Firefighters in outlying areas must cover more territory with fewer stations.

Beyond Loop 410, the freeway that encircles San Antonio's core neighborhoods, 18 fire stations are scattered across 280 square miles.

Inside the loop, 31 stations saturate nearly 170 square miles.

Firefighters assigned to far-flung locales must navigate gated subdivisions, cul-de-sacs and winding streets with names like Silent Oaks, Silent Stream and Silent Hills.

Such amenities attract homeowners, but hinder a speedy response from a company of firefighters.

San Antonio spends less money per capita on fire protection than any other major city in Texas. Meanwhile, San Antonio's annexation process has swallowed at least 175 square miles of land since 1990.

"There's been phenomenal growth in the city, but they haven't added the necessary resources in the last 10 years to keep up with it," said Chris Steele, president of the San Antonio firefighters union, which has clashed with City Hall in staffing and funding disputes.

Fire Chief Robert Ojeda, who retired in February after 13 years as chief, didn't respond to interview requests for this article.

Other San Antonio fire officials acknowledged that protecting the outskirts of the city is more difficult than protecting neighborhoods near downtown.

They pointed out the five-minute standard set by the National Fire Protection Association isn't ironclad, it's voluntary. Relatively few cities are able to meet the guidelines.

"If I could snap my finger and turn our response time in half, I would certainly do that," Assistant Chief Carl Wedge said. "Standards like that are exactly that — they're a standard. They're something every city works towards, but doesn't



Philip Townsend watched this neighbor's house burn last year while waiting for what seemed like an excessively long time for fire crews to arrive. The \$250,000 house, which was a loss, was rebuilt on the slab in the Stone Oak subdivision on the far North Side.

achieve."

The Fire Department is "between a rock and a hard place," said Deputy Chief Rodney Hitzfelder. In the mid-1990s, officials proposed closing some downtown stations to open new stations in outlying areas. A public outcry erupted and the proposal was rejected.

Another problem: The Fire Department can only recommend, not mandate, the presence of a fire station in a newly annexed area. In past years, that created tension between fire officials and city planners, Hitzfelder said.

Both men, veterans of the department, emphasized that a working smoke alarm can be even more effective at saving lives than a rapid response by firefighters.

They blamed a lack of smoke detectors for the deaths of former state Sen. Frank Madla, his granddaughter and mother-in-law because of a fire at Thanksgiving in Madla's South Side home.

Firefighters arrived at the fatal blaze in less than five minutes.

"Yes, we'd love to lower our response times," Hitzfelder said. "But ultimately, what saves lives of people? It's being notified of the danger in their own home."

"At some point, you have to take care of yourself."

Fast-moving fires

A fire can spread with astonishing speed.

In one experiment, federal researchers set up a living room with a sofa, love seat, end table, lamp and carpeting. A match was used to ignite the sofa. With no sprinkler system in the room, flames entirely engulfed it in three minutes, 15 seconds.

The dense smoke that spreads through a structure, blinding and suffocating victims who aren't even near flames, is even more dangerous. More people die from smoke inhalation than burns.

Not every blaze is so serious. But dousing fires early can save the lives of residents, and of the firefighters who must rush into smoky, burning buildings to save them.

Guidelines set by the National Fire Protection Association, a group of more than 80,000 safety professionals that writes fire codes and other rules, reflect the urgent need to swiftly reach fires.

The association recommends that in 90 percent of all structure fires in an agency's jurisdiction, the first fire engine should arrive in five minutes or less.

The guidelines say it should take a minute or less for firefighters to mobilize and hit the road, and four minutes or less of travel time for the first unit to arrive.

"We would have all liked to see a two-minute travel time,

but we had to come up with something acceptable," said Bob Barr, a fire protection engineer with the Phoenix Fire Department who helped write the standard.

A quick response is crucial, Barr said. If firefighters take much longer than five minutes, the amount of structure damage can rise dramatically.

The association analyzed national data showing how fires that spread out of control killed more people and damaged more property.

Fires that weren't immediately contained and that spread to other floors in a structure caused, on average, \$32,000 in property damage. That's more than 10 times the average damage caused by fires that were extinguished and confined to the room of origin.

About 27 people per 1,000 died in major fires, compared with 2 people per 1,000 who died in fires contained to one room, according to the association's analysis of national data.

That analysis weighed heavily on the committee members who wrote the standard. But when the response-time guidelines were first introduced in 2001, city officials across the country complained the recommendations would strain municipal budgets.

In 2004, officials representing some cities were added to the association's committee that wrote the standard. They took a stab at revising the rules.

"Lo and behold, nothing substantive was changed," said Gary Tokle, assistant vice president of the association. "Those folks didn't vote against it."

The committee's new members realized that getting to fires quickly is vital to public safety, Tokle said. The standard was written to take into account that no fire department can reach every emergency in less than five minutes — hence the 90 percent buffer.

In San Antonio, there were nearly 7,320 structure fires from January 2000 through November 2006. Of those incidents, firefighters mobilized and drove to the fires within five minutes in 4,340 incidents.

That amounts to nearly 60 percent, short of the 90 percent gold standard set by the national fire association.

The city's database is missing part of the process. The time spent by residents waiting on hold after dialing 911 isn't captured in the data. And the time spent telling the 911 operator a fire's location isn't reflected in city records, either.

Daunting problem

When responses are viewed as blips on a map of San Antonio, thousands of records form a pattern in which the public can clearly see, for the first time, how the farther a building is from the inner city, the longer it is likely to burn.

It was 1 o'clock on a mild October morning last year when a good Samaritan pounded on the front door of Gilbert Bishop's home to warn him a neighbor's house was on fire.

Bishop and his girlfriend grabbed their dogs, Bat and Thumper, and ran outside.

"It looked like an oven, with flames shooting out of there," recalled Bishop, a retired trucker who lives in Sunrise.

His neighbors weren't home, but glowing embers threatened Bishop's house, which was only a few feet away from the inferno.

Bishop tried dousing the flames with a garden hose as he waited for help.

"When you're standing there hosing down a fire, it seems like time is really draggin'," Bishop said.

City records show it took more than seven minutes, 30 seconds for the first firetruck after the alarm was sounded.

That was hardly out of the norm in Sunrise. In the past six years, 40 fires have flared in the neighborhood, causing an estimated \$400,000 in damage. Firefighters were able to respond in less than five minutes to only two of those calls.

Sunrise juts like a tooth on the city's edge outside Loop 410 next to the town of Kirby. Before the 1994 annexation, Kirby quickly responded to fires in Sunrise, said Fire Chief Kevin Riedel. Kirby's fire department consists of volunteers and full-time personnel stationed practically next door to the subdivision.

When San Antonio announced its annexation plans, some Sunrise residents welcomed the news, while others complained bitterly in public meetings. They predicted San Antonio would fail to reach fires and medical emergencies fast enough.

"It's a life and death situation," Dianna Marin, president of Sunrise's neighborhood association, said in November 1994. "All we're wanting is to make sure our children and our families are safe."

Then-Mayor Nelson Wolff told residents at an Oct. 4, 1994, public hearing that if San Antonio didn't annex Sunrise and other proposed areas, the city would become landlocked by suburbs, unable to grow, like Dallas.

"See how that city is dying," said Wolff, who is now Bexar County judge.

But since the annexation, Sunrise has posed a daunting problem to firefighters. Records show the city has known for more than a decade that San Antonio's Station No. 38 off Ritiman Road, the closest fire station, is outside the preferred range for a speedy response.

Wedge acknowledged delays in reaching Sunrise, but said there are no plans for the city to build a new fire station nearby. San Antonio could explore the possibility of partner-

ing with Kirby in an "automatic aid agreement" to cover Sunrise.

The closest firetruck, whether it belongs to Kirby or San Antonio, would automatically be dispatched to emergencies in the subdivision.

Other cities frequently sign such agreements with suburbs. But only one exists here, between San Antonio and Converse.

Rapid growth

Fires strike more frequently in the older homes of the inner city than new subdivisions. But in the mid-1990s, as thousands of residents flocked to the city's periphery, fire officials announced they could handle emergencies near downtown with fewer stations.

They proposed relocating some fire stations to outlying areas.

"The demand for fire and emergency services has outpaced San Antonio's rapid recent growth," noted the Fire Department's 1994 master plan. As San Antonio's population was expected to surpass 1.1 million residents, the demands on the Fire Department would worsen, the report predicted.

Residents living near downtown were outraged at the idea of losing fire stations. They accused the city of neglecting poor neighborhoods for wealthy residents living miles away.

Some members of the fire union also condemned the proposal. To this day, fire administrators feel the union fanned the flames of the controversy as a way to get more stations — and more jobs.

The residents and fire union won. Downtown kept its stations, and fire officials don't plan closing them anytime soon.

"I ain't going through that again," said Hitzfelder, who believes the Express-News sensationalized the controversy.

But the troubles foreseen by fire officials who wrote the 1994 master plan haven't gone away.

In December 1998, San Antonio annexed the Dominion, an elite enclave with its own country club. Behind the guarded gates, retired NBA star David Robinson owns a mansion on a street named after his nickname: Admirals Way.

Many of the Dominion's residents worried about fire protection.

The main entrance on Dominion Drive begins on the east side of Interstate 10. There is no underpass, and the closest San Antonio fire station was a temporary structure of corrugated metal across the highway, about 2 miles to the south, which meant firefighters had to drive up and down the frontage roads and use the nearest highway exit to reach the neighborhood.

City officials promised to build a permanent fire station, and to seek federal funding to

raise a portion of Interstate 10 and build an underpass that could provide firefighters a direct route to the Dominion.

But drainage problems led to cost overruns for the underpass.

"I don't think anyone realized the magnitude of the project," said Clay Smith, project director for the Texas Department of Transportation. "It was originally funded at \$6 million, and it turned out to be \$20 million by the time it was implemented."

Nearly a decade after the city annexed the Dominion, construction for the overpass started just a few months ago. It is expected to take more than two years to finish.

Only seven fires have struck the Dominion since January 2000. But firefighters failed to arrive at any of those blazes in less than five minutes.

It takes firefighters longer to reach the neighborhood than almost any other part of the city, with a median response time of nearly 9½ minutes.

That's how long it took the department to arrive at a house on Vineyard Drive that was under construction in 2001 when some paint chemicals caught fire in the garage.

By chance, a prospective buyer and a salesperson were at the house and immediately called 911. They managed to extinguish the fire before the department arrived, but they were stunned at how long they had to wait before firefighters appeared.

"If it had really truly been a fire, by the time they got there I don't think there would have been much left of the house," said the builder, Art Burdick, owner of Burdick Custom Homes.

A few blocks away on Whitechurch Lane, John Jacobs watched his two-story stucco home go up in gray smoke as he waited for firefighters in February 2000.

The first firetruck to reach the home didn't record its arrival, but the second vehicle on the scene logged in with a response time of over 16 minutes.

Jacobs, a mortgage banker, stood on his front lawn growing angrier with each passing minute. Helpless, he turned his frustration on the neighborhood security guards who waited with him for the trucks to arrive.

"I was literally yelling at them: 'Where the hell is the Fire Department?'" he said.

By the time firefighters doused the blaze, it had caused half a million dollars in damage, he said.

"We believe it contributed to much more damage to the house than needed to be."

Robert Lee, board chairman for the Dominion Homeowners Association, said safety concerns among residents are growing. Given the high-dollar

See DEMAND/20A

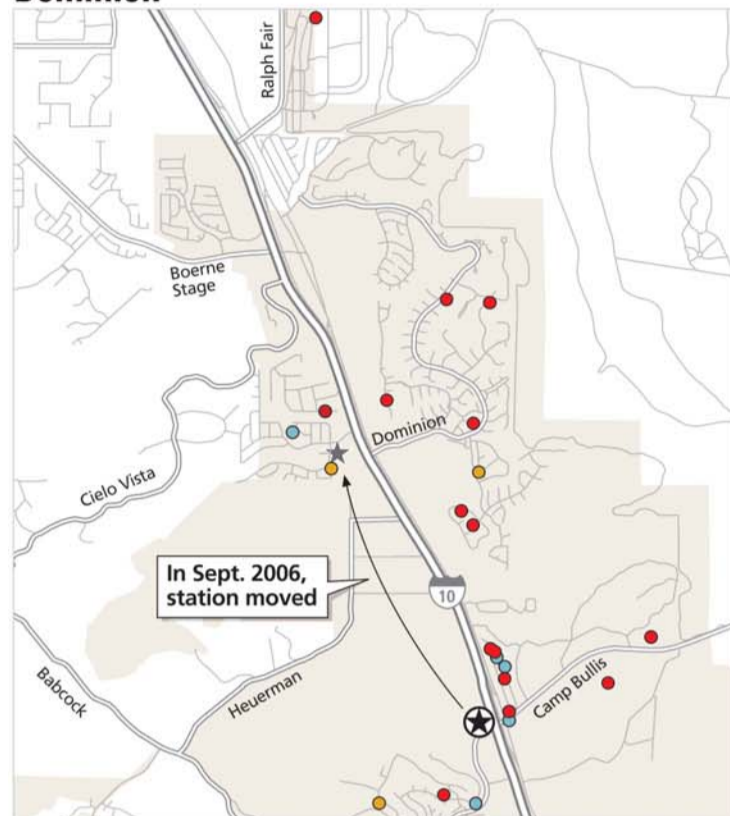


Hot spots, cool spots Fire response times, 2000-2006

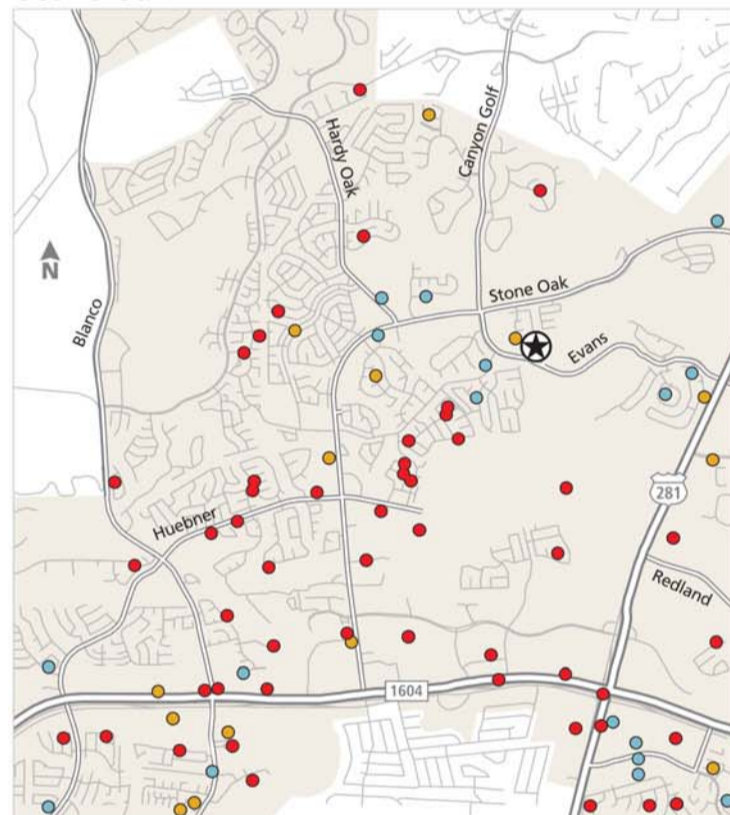
The Dominion, Stone Oak and Sunrise are among dozens of outlying neighborhoods that rarely get a rapid response to fire alarms. In contrast, in the Woodlawn, Prospect Hill area of the West Side, fire trucks routinely show up at a burning house within 5 minutes, the standard set for a timely response to a fire alarm.

Response time from SAFD dispatch to arrival SAFD station
 ● Under 5 minutes ● Between 5 and 6 minutes ● 6 minutes or more

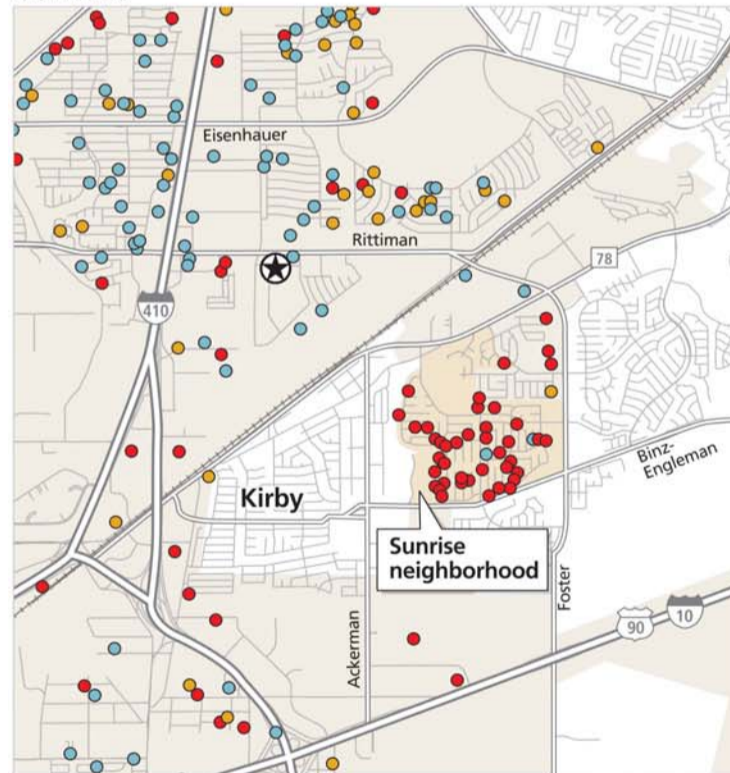
Dominion



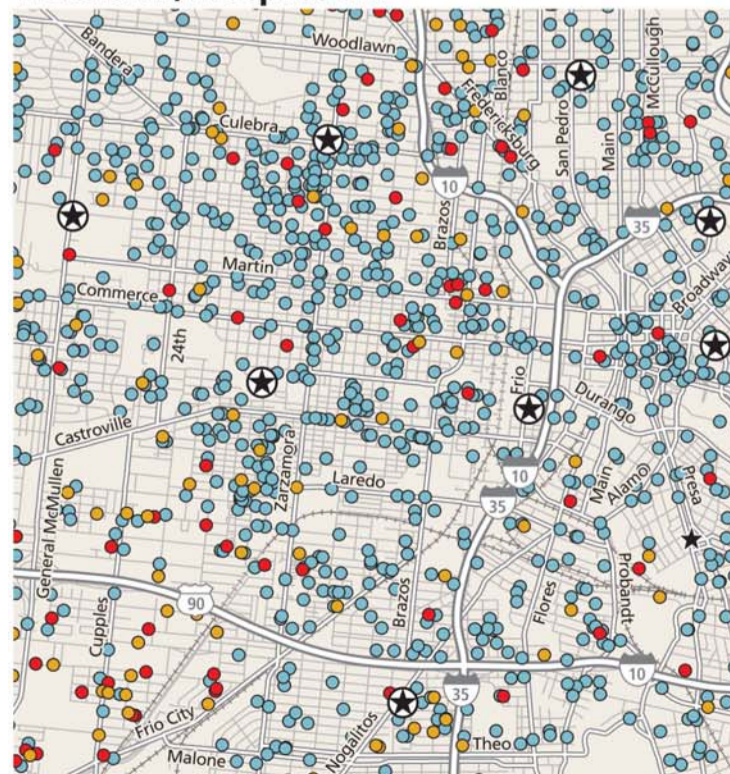
Stone Oak



Sunrise



Woodlawn/Prospect Hill



Source: San Antonio Fire Department, data mapped by Database Editor Kelly Guckian

EXPRESS-NEWS GRAPHIC

Demand for services outpaces San Antonio's rapid growth

CONTINUED FROM 19A

property tax values, he said, some homeowners feel short-changed.

"You know what they're doing is just getting the tax dollars and not putting the money back in for what they're responsible for," Lee said.

Less funding

The Fire Department ranks nearly last on San Antonio's list of capital improvements, which pays for things like fire stations. Overall, the city operates four fire stations per 100,000 residents — fewer than any other major Texas city.

San Antonio also provides less funding, on a per capita basis, to staff those stations.

Last year, the City Council approved \$133 million for the Fire Department from the city's general fund to pay mostly for personnel. That's \$107 per capita, less than funding levels in Houston, Dallas, Austin and Fort Worth.

Austin spends about \$150 per resident, the highest level among the state's major cities.

In San Antonio, it costs about \$3.5 million to build a fire station, \$400,000 to equip it, and \$1.2 million annually to staff it.

Fire officials said it's difficult to compare fire departments in other cities, since they often operate differently.

They expressed pride in a funding plan that puts four firefighters, not three, on almost every truck. That extra firefighter, recommended by the National Fire Protection Association, boosts the department's effectiveness.

In interviews, fire officials didn't complain about a lack of funds hampering their ability to serve San Antonio.

Wedge, Hitzfelder and officials in other city departments gave varying accounts of who ultimately decides where new fire stations are built — or whether they get built.

Hitzfelder described tension between the Fire Department and city planning officials who stake out new land to annex. He said planners ultimately decide if a newly annexed area receives a fire station.

"We go to Planning and say, 'Here's what we can take in annexation,'" Hitzfelder said. Then he said planning officials sometimes try to add neighborhoods and expand the annexation.

"There's a battle on," Hitzfelder said. "There's always a fight about what we can really do, and the boundaries and all that type of stuff. So we deal with that."

In the same interview, Wedge said disagreements flared up in the past. But he added that in recent years, the Fire Department's recommendations have driven annexation.

Communities have been cut from annexation plans after the Fire Department called for a station to serve them, he said. The cost of the station and other city services outweighed the projected tax revenue, he said, so annexation in those cases didn't make sense.

Planning Director Emil Moncivais said there have been "disagreements" about whether people living on the edges of an annexed area should be included, but he argued the process often moves forward smoothly.

Former Planning Director David Pasley, who oversaw a period of aggressive growth by San Antonio in the mid-1990s, said he didn't recall any major battles with the Fire Department.

"There were certainly some discussions," Pasley said. "But I don't recall any dust-ups."

Number crunchers in the city's budget office at times disagreed with the Fire Department's recommendations, Pasley said. Officials there sometimes felt the Fire Department was asking for a station that wasn't really required.

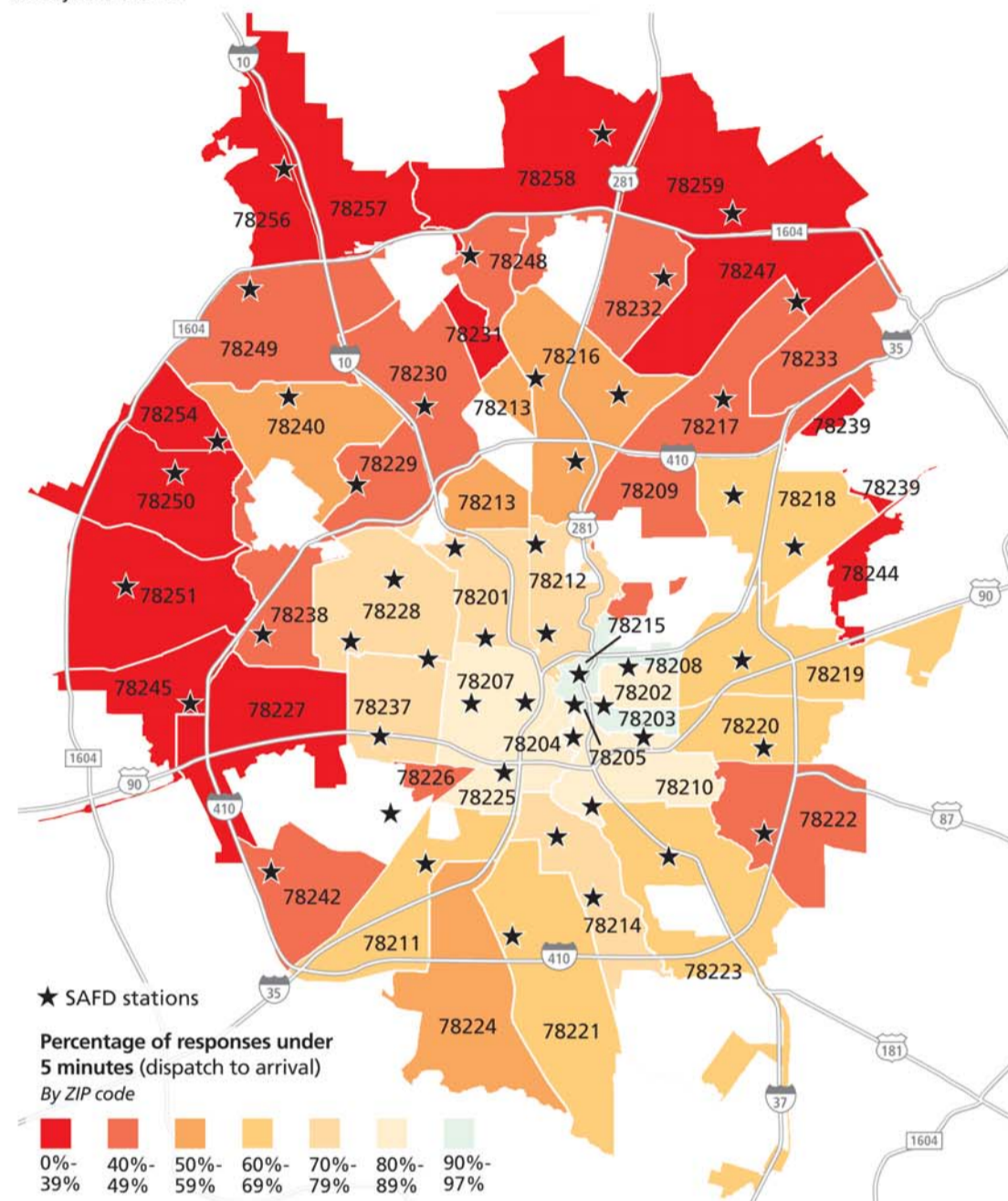
"The Fire Department might come in, and say, 'Hey, we see it as an opportunity to get more resources' than perhaps they deserve," Pasley said. "The budget office, their job is to watch out for taxpayers."

Looking for help

Just after midnight on April 28, 2005, Townsend was up late watching the Phoenix Suns defeat the Memphis Grizzlies in the NBA playoffs when he no-

Fire response slower near city limits

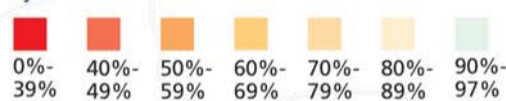
Inner-city neighborhoods enjoy excellent fire protection, but you will likely wait longer for a fire truck the farther you live from downtown. The San Antonio Express-News used mapping software to analyze a Fire Department database that recorded response times to all structure fires in the city between January 2000 and November 2006. Response times are measured from dispatch to arrival. ZIP codes with fewer than 10 fires are not included in this map. White areas show municipalities or military bases that San Antonio firefighters usually don't serve.



★ SAFD stations

Percentage of responses under 5 minutes (dispatch to arrival)

By ZIP code



ZIP code	Under 5 minutes	Total incidents	Percent
78254	0	10	0%
78259	2	32	6%
78244	5	59	8%
78239	2	20	10%
78257	3	20	15%
78258	12	65	18%
78251	33	117	28%
78247	37	129	29%
78245	39	121	32%
78250	76	227	33%
78231	6	17	35%
78256	7	19	37%
78227	108	285	38%
78233	61	154	40%
78226	20	50	40%
78242	71	175	41%
78222	40	97	41%
78209	68	160	43%
78249	64	148	43%
78217	85	196	43%
78238	51	112	46%
78248	16	35	46%
78229	86	188	46%
78230	87	185	47%
78232	65	137	47%

ZIP code	Under 5 minutes	Total incidents	Percent
78224	31	59	53%
78213	108	196	55%
78240	135	233	58%
78216	141	243	58%
78218	137	230	60%
78219	62	100	62%
78211	128	200	64%
78221	128	200	64%
78223	131	204	64%
78220	130	196	66%
78237	158	213	74%
78201	249	332	75%
78228	247	329	75%
78214	105	138	76%
78212	156	197	79%
78225	48	60	80%
78210	247	304	81%
78202	217	252	86%
78204	88	100	88%
78207	403	456	88%
78208	68	76	89%
78203	86	96	90%
78215	42	45	93%
78205	60	62	97%

Source: San Antonio Fire Department data, mapped by Database Editor Kelly Guckian, compiled by Staff Writer John Tedesco

EXPRESS-NEWS GRAPHIC

ticed an eerie light flickering in a window.

He got up to look. A half block away, flames roared through the roof of the house being built for Garrow. The spacious brick home was nearly completed — the carpeting had just been laid.

Townsend told his wife he was going to get the exact location of the fire and call 911. Wearing sweats and a tank top, he rushed outside, bent his 6-foot-2-inch frame into his Mercedes E320, and began a long journey through the winding streets of Stone Oak to find help.

The design of Stone Oak is different from the straight, well-connected grids of a traditional neighborhood in the inner city.

Curvy roads, gates, speed bumps and other hallmarks of suburbia attract many homebuyers to Stone Oak. Such amenities can be found all over San Antonio's edges.

But the very things that make residents feel secure in their neighborhood often hinder firefighters.

In some subdivisions, firefighters have been forced to break through the gates that won't slide open for their trucks.

"People out there want gated

communities," Wedge said. "That slows us down. You want to be secure, that's fine. But from a fire department perspective, you're slowing us down."

The firefighters in Stone Oak must cover a larger area than their colleagues downtown. The winding streets often don't offer a direct route to a burning house.

"Make one mistake, take one wrong turn, you got a cul-de-sac, and you're backing up," Hitzfelder said. In a firetruck, he added, backing up is "very, very, very slow."

Pasley, the former San Antonio planning director, said the city failed to design well-connected neighborhoods. He said residents are paying the price with longer commute times and reduced fire service.

"We have created gridlock," Pasley said. "The same reason it takes you a long time to get to (U.S.) 281 to get to work downtown is the same reason it takes longer for the Fire Department to respond."

Those factors weighed heavily on Townsend the night his neighbor's house burned.

Townsend, in a rush, had bumped into another neighbor who said 911 had been alerted. But Townsend couldn't hear sirens. He decided to drive to

Stone Oak Parkway, a main thoroughfare, to guide firefighters.

Townsend steered his Mercedes from the burning house on Muleshoe Pass to Scenic Knoll, took a right at Marble Spring, a left at Knights Cross Drive, and drove a half-mile to the parkway.

No firetrucks. Townsend drove back to the fire. He knew Garrow was living in Stone Oak while her new home was under construction. So he drove to her house, knocked on her door, warned her about the fire, then drove back to Muleshoe Pass.

No firetrucks. It felt like a long time had passed. Townsend and a handful of neighbors gathered in the front yard. Somewhere in Stone Oak, distant sirens wailed.

"You could hear the sirens but they weren't getting any closer," Townsend said. "It just seemed to take a while — especially when I know that a (fire) substation is right down the street. And that was the thing. I watched it burn for a while."

Standing with his neighbors, watching flames lick the night sky, Townsend decided firefighters had simply lost their way.

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