

Fire

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fire rapidly through the house, forcing firefighters into a defensive battle, Staberg said.

Firefighters began fighting the fire offensively from the inside, he said. Staberg said he was afraid the ceiling and walls would collapse, so he pulled the firefighters out.

Frozen equipment, such as air masks and radios, caused more problems, Staberg said.

A ladder extended from one engine sprayed water onto the roof of the garage. The deck gun on another truck shot water through a front window on the east side.

The firefighters concentrated on controlling exposure of the outside walls of the house to keep the fire from spreading to trees and other nearby houses, Staberg said.

Staberg told his companies to be especially cautious of the ice. A thick layer covered the driveway, street and sidewalks. Icicles hung from fire hydrants, hoses and fire engine rigging.

Some firefighters slipped and fell, but injuries were minimal.

Four firefighters were injured in the blaze. Chuck Schweitzer, of the eighth engine company, was pulling down ceiling in the house when a pike pole fell and hit him in the abdomen.

With assistance, Schweitzer was able to walk out of the house. He was taken to Lincoln General Hospital for X-rays, but had no serious injuries.

Gary Worster, of the fourth en-



Travis Heying/DN

Ten hours later, firefighters were still investigating a fire that ravaged the University of Nebraska Foundation house maintained for the NU president.

gine company, injured his hip and also was taken to Lincoln General, Staberg said.

Julio Talero was treated for frostbite, and Dan Harms was taken to Lincoln General with a knee injury.

As the fire raged on, remains of the roof collapsed. A 30-foot-tall evergreen tree next to the house snapped from the weight of the water freezing to it. It crashed down onto the roof and partially crushed the front of the house.

As 50 firefighters worked to control the blaze, their ice-covered coats and gloves froze stiff, rendering some immobile. Staberg said he wanted them rotating regularly to keep their gear from freezing up.

Firefighters in the "rehab" bus helped each other crack the ice off their coats and helmets.

Some firefighters complained of having to thaw out because they felt colder when they went back out.

One firefighter stepped onto the bus with ice hanging off his eyelashes and mustache.

"My radio is froze to my hand," he said, holding up an ice-coated walkie-talkie stuck to his open palm.

Four university police officers also were at the scene to help keep spectators away and investigate the fire, Sgt. Bill Manning said.

President Smith arrived shortly after the fire started and stayed with neighbors next door. Other concerned neighbors stared out their windows at the blaze.

The presidential residence was used for meetings, meals and social gatherings for the university.

Legislature considers option to vote by mail

By Ted Taylor
Senior Reporter

Giving voters in small political subdivisions the option to vote by mail would decrease costs and increase turnout, Nebraska Secretary of State Scott Moore said Thursday.

Moore, who testified before the Legislature's Government, Military and Veterans Committee in favor of LB964, said the bill would be restricted to subdivisions with populations of less than 5,000.

"Smaller localities with fewer voters feel cost efficiency can be achieved with mail-in ballots," he said. "The added benefit is that it would definitely increase turnout."

The bill, co-sponsored by almost half of the committee, would affect mail-in ballots only for special elections addressing an issue — not a candidate or recall election.

Sen. Jim Cudaback of Riverdale, who introduced the bill, said it was "common sense."

"Cost is one reason," he said. "And input from citizens is another."

Cudaback said that keeping polls open 12 hours and spending about \$30 per voter in townships with small populations didn't make sense.

Robert Bethel of the Lancaster County Election Commission task force said the mail-in ballots also would educate voters.

"The voting public is better in-

formed when they have written ballots," he said. "They have a better ability to make decisions — educated decisions."

Sen. C.N. "Bud" Robinson of Blair, committee chairman, agreed with Bethel.

"If you had mail-in voting, it would increase your interest in government."

No public opponents of the bill testified, but Sen. John Hilgert of Omaha asked about the possibility of mail fraud.

But Bethel said he wasn't worried.

"We've got a good postal service," Bethel said. "I'm not too worried about fraud. The integrity of the U.S. Postal Service is not a factor in voting by mail."

Moore said the possibility of fraud was nothing new.

"It is no more of a concern than it is now with the absentee ballots," he said.

Hilgert said he was still "uncomfortable" with the idea.

"But Secretary of State Moore made some very valid points. My main concern is maintaining the integrity of the election process," he said. "I'm not too sympathetic to the argument of it saving a few dollars and making it more convenient."

After the hearing, Hilgert said he was more comfortable with the bill than he was before the hearing.

The committee took no action on the bill.

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