

DAILY NEWS

Wave of commercial fires stirs painful memories of arson in neighborhoods north of Manhattan

By Mike Jaccarino
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The Bronx is burning - again.

A wave of commercial fires has ripped through the borough this year, conjuring up mournful memories of decades ago when arson was the common culprit in the gritty neighborhoods north of Manhattan.

Two commercial fires erupted since Monday, one at the Morris Park Boxing Club at 644 Morris Park Ave. and another at a strip mall in Norwood - the latest in a worrisome spate of fires that have displaced workers and businesses around the borough.

"I am extremely concerned about the rash of recent commercial fires in the Bronx," Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr. said Tuesday. "I hope they are the product of unfortunate coincidence and bad luck, and not something more sinister."

The boxing club fire followed a larger one Monday on 204th St., near Bainbridge Ave. in Norwood, that destroyed six businesses, including a Bank of America branch, a diner, a Foodtown, a dentist's office and a funeral home.

"I'm shocked and dismayed," said Fernando Tirado, district manager for Community Board 7. "Speaking with the residents and business owners - some who have been there for 40 years - they've never seen anything like this before. But we have to try to keep up morale and rebuild."

Amazingly, it was the third fire to rip through the jinxed 204th St. strip mall in the past year.

A ferocious five-alarm fire Halloween weekend engulfed the entire block and gutted 14 businesses. At the time, the Bainbridge Bakery and Pastry shop was only two days short of a \$300,000 reopening after having been leveled in yet another fire in April.

The spate of fires on 204th St. has residents and business owners thinking the worst.

"Two places in two months burned down. It's crazy," said Richard Vasquez. "This supermarket has been there a very long time and I can't believe it's down right now. The just redid it and now it's gone."

"It seemed like the whole block was burning down," said local Rey Marcano, 43, a bus driver. "I don't think it was accidental."

On Oct. 28 a blaze leveled five stores on Southern Blvd. near 163rd St. and a late March conflagration ripped through a shopping strip in Wakefield. The Wakefield fire left eight businesses - all between 235th and 236th Sts., uninhabitable.

Earlier this year authorities arrested a 40-year-old Bronx man for setting a March 22 fire in Westchester Square that ripped through six businesses and devastated a portion of the fledgling shopping district. William Crean allegedly set the fire at 21 Latin Lounge at 122 Westchester Square, which quickly spread to five adjoining businesses.

City officials said they are doing everything possible to help displaced workers and business owners rebuild from the ashes of the Norwood fires.

The city Department of Small Business Services is holding a meeting Dec. 29 at 10:30 a.m. in Community Board 7 offices at 229A E. 204th St.

SBS spokeswoman Laura Postiglione said the department has numerous tools, including grant money and help accessing loans, to get owners back in business.

"We'll work to help the displaced workers get temporary employment if the business is not going to reopen or is temporarily closed," she said. "We're working...to get them back on their feet as soon as possible."

One Bronx merchant said the fires don't mean the borough is headed back to the "Bronx is Burning" days of the 1970s.

"I grew up in the Bronx and from 1971 to 1975 it looked war-torn Beirut with buildings that looked bombed out," said John Bonizio, president of the Association of the Merchants & Business Professionals of Westchester Square.

"I don't believe that's happening again. This is just a blip on the radar screen."