

Bridge fire arson claim

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Fire officials have suggested the Tauranga Eastern Link bridge fire which covered Papamoa in a blanket of black smoke last night may have been started deliberately.

Fire safety and NZTA engineers will examine the scene of last night's blaze this morning in an attempt to determine the official cause.



The Tauranga Eastern Link bridge fire has caused an estimated \$20 million worth of damage. Photo: Roy Hopkins.

But deputy chief fire officer of the Papamoa volunteer fire brigade Brent Sanford is adamant that arson is to blame.

“Somebody lit a fire underneath the bridge in the foam that stacked underneath it,” says Brent.

Polystyrene blocks used as packing in the overpass ramps caught fire at around 8pm last night, causing a spectacular blaze that spread toxic black smoke across the area.

Fire Fighters from Papamoa were called, and were backed up by crews from Mount Maunganui, Tauranga and Greerton as the extent of the fire became apparent.

Brent adds: “They got in the side door and set fire to the bridge.

“Workmen drove past about 20 minutes before and there was no sign of fire. They were working on it pretty late. At this stage it looks suspicious.

“We tried to contain it and stop it spreading too far.”

It is thought the fire has caused up to \$20 million worth of damage and there are fears the damaged section of structure may have to be pulled down and rebuilt.

Six Papamoa volunteers were assisted by fire fighters from across the region, and at one stage there were 24 fire fighters on the scene, says Brent.

The blaze is among six suspicious fires in Papamoa since the Papamoa Hall fire on October 28. Three suspicious rubbish bin fires were followed by a scrub fire last Saturday.

“We are just warning shop owners to be vigilant about rubbish bins behind their shops,” says Brent.

Tauranga senior station officer Kevin Cowper says the initial knockdown was achieved in about half an hour, but fire fighters were at the site until around 11.30pm. The first alarm was raised about 8pm.

“The overpass is constructed with layers of polystyrene blocks to take up space without creating more weight,” says Kevin.

“They caught fire and were burning. We think they had one more pour to do on top and they were getting ready for that.

“They caught on fire and started burning backwards. The guys actually got onto it and knocked it down pretty quickly, but there had been some serious heat in there.

“I guess they are going to have to pull all that burned polystyrene out.”

NZ Transport Agency's Waikato/ Bay of Plenty Regional Director, Harry Wilson says he's thankful the site was closed at the time and no one was hurt.

"We do not know the cause of the fire at this stage but police and fire fighters will be investigating the site today," says Harry.

"There has been damage, however the extent of the damage and the overall impact on the project will not be clear until the site is deemed safe and our engineers can investigate"

There will be little to no impact on motorists over the coming days as the area of the fire is off the state highway, says Harry.

"We would like to thank the members of the public who alerted emergency services to the fire initially and acknowledge the fire fighters who worked tirelessly to get the fire under control."



*The Tauranga Eastern Link bridge this morning following last night's fire.
Photo: Cameron Avery.*



Polystyrene blocks at the TEL construction site.



Papamoa Community Patrol.





Photo by Rosalie Crawford.



Photo by Caitlin Darby.



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Photo by Ethan Broomhead.



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Photo by Bill Gibson-Patmore.



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