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Orange wall of fire

By CASEY NEILL

AN "orange wall of fire" that engulfed a Dandenong South flooring factory Thursday night could have turned deadly.

QEP Australia managing director Bruce McLaren was in the company's Dunlopillo Drive office when the flames took hold in the warehouse about 6pm on 19 September.

"We high-tailed it out of there, called the fire brigade," he said.

"By the time the first appliance arrived the whole thing was already stuffed.

"Had it happened three hours earlier you'd have 50 people in there.

"The pace that I saw the fire take hold and literally level the place to the ground, I hate to think about what might have happened."

More than 30 fire vehicles and 100 CFA and MFB firefighters fought for 90 minutes to bring the blaze under control.

Crews remained at the scene over the weekend as it continued to smoulder. The risk of wall and roof collapse has hampered investigations and the fire's cause is still unknown.

"The place is trashed. It's going to be pushed over," Mr McLaren said.

He told The Journal on Friday that heavy machinery was due to start the demolition process on Saturday.

Mr McLaren said the site had been home to the flooring distribution business for the past eight years and contained carpet, vinyl flooring, underlay, timber, adhesives, tools and more.

The \$4 million in burning stock sent a toxic plume of smoke over Dandenong and surrounding suburbs and prompted a CFA warning for residents with breathing difficulties to stay indoors.

"From a company point of view we're trying to keep our business momentum going," he said.

"We've been performing quite well in a difficult market and we have long-term and valued employees."

About 50 people work at the site.

"And we've got three other smaller location warehouses around metropolitan Melbourne," Mr McLaren said.

"We will be relocating some of the staff to those.

"We'll probably ask some staff to take annual leave, between four and eight weeks to get back to some sort of trading environment."

Company management met on Friday and will formulate a plan of action over the coming days and weeks.

"We're keeping staff fully informed," he said.

CFA senior station officer Rick Owen said firefighters did an outstanding job protecting two neighbouring businesses.

"The blaze could easily have spread, creating an incredibly dangerous situation," he said.



Flames engulf a Dandenong South factory on Thursday night.
Picture: KEITH PAKENHAM - CFA

Gutter crawlers nabbed in police sting

By CASEY NEILL

AN undercover police sting nabbed seven men soliciting prostitutes in central Dandenong last week - and the crackdown isn't over.

Sergeant Pat Green said the men, aged from their mid-twenties to mid-fifties, approached two officers who acted as street sex workers on 12 September.

"They will all be summonsed to one court date at Dandenong Magistrates' Court," he said.

Sgt Green said covert and overt operations would continue until the problem was gone and encouraged members of the public to assist.

"If the locals can see a particular spike in days and times, that would be very handy for us to know," he said.

"We can target our resources accordingly. We'll continue to target gutter crawlers.

"If we do identify anyone they'll be arrested and they'll be charged. Summonses will be delivered to home addresses.

"We don't tolerate this sort of behaviour. It's having an adverse impact on the local community.

"You've been warned."

Police made one arrest and interviewed three suspects in a prostitution blitz in Dandenong's CBD in July.

This followed a Star News Group report that month that gutter crawlers propositioned a 19-year-old girl twice in seven minutes as she waited for a bus in Scott Street.

In February, Star reported that a 70-year-old woman was propositioned outside her Scott Street home and the problem was instilling "fear and discomfort" among residents and visitors.

Greater Dandenong Local Area Commander, Inspector Bruce Kitchen, said street prostitution had been a problem in Dandenong for the past seven years.

Sgt Green urged residents and shopkeepers to anonymously report prostitution to Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000 or call him at Dandenong Police Station on 9767 7444.

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Boss inspired by staff effort

By CASEY NEILL

STAFF from a Dandenong South flooring company have been "inspirational" in the wake of a blaze that gutted their warehouse, says QEP Australia managing director Bruce Maclaren.

Police and CFA investigators last week deemed the 19 September fire at the Dunlopillo Drive premises non-suspicious.

"I think they're expecting some sort of sparks occurred from something electrical," Mr Maclaren said.

He was in the office when flames took hold in the warehouse about 6pm.

More than 100 CFA and MFB firefighters fought for 90 minutes to bring the blaze under control.

Mr Maclaren has been "staggered" at the support he's received from the community and workers in the aftermath.

"It's a close-knit business like most small companies are," he said.

"They're all available any time. They're working in conditions that would be less than acceptable normally.

"I'm inspired by that."

He's now trying to get employees back to work as quickly as possible.

"We're really targeting minimal disruption," he said.

"Half of my business is functioning as normal.



Flames engulf the Dandenong South warehouse.

Picture: KEITH PAKENHAM - CFA

"The other half, it's going to ramp up over the course of the next four or five weeks.

"We've now got probably about 80 per cent of our administration staff - albeit in very cramped surrounds - placed.

"The warehouse staff are our biggest challenge."

Mr Maclaren met with about 38 of his 50 workers on Friday morning to update them on progress and offer counselling support.

Centrelink representatives attended to discuss entitlements and Integrated Program Recruitment offered to find casual

employment for all affected employees.

"The staff were very appreciative of what's happened so far in terms of trying to keep the business running," Mr Maclaren said.

"We're hopefully quite close to finding some more premises in Dandenong on a short-term basis."

He said the company would return to its home of eight years if the landlord decides to rebuild.

"My understanding is the whole thing is going to be levelled very quickly," he said.