

» FIRE

FROM PAGE A1

Novak's chief, Matt Ladwig, praised the officer for risking his own life to save others — though Novak isn't so sure he deserves all that credit.

He suffered smoke inhalation, and his voice was still raspy and punctuated with occasional coughs on Tuesday, when he told the Daily Press about going into the building.

Novak was forced by heavy smoke to retreat from the second floor, but he didn't abandon his rescue effort.

Still searching

When driven down the stairs, Novak turned his attention to residents of the first floor.

"I came back down and one of the tenants was still in that bottom apartment, and I told him the smoke was coming and he had to get out," Novak said. "Next I went outside and I went around the back and checked some doors back there because there's almost like hidden doors — they're not on the roadway but I knew they were there — and there was black billowing smoke coming from one already. No one was back there so I went back around front."

By that time, more residents were congregating along Manypenny Avenue and watching their homes as they were engulfed.

"The guy from that first apartment that I told to get out before, he told me his roommate went back in to look for a cat," Novak said. "So I went back in and told him to get out. I was flipping over all the furniture but unfortunately I couldn't



Novak said his wife, Carmen, and their 7-month-old son are always in the back of his mind when he is on the job. (Contributed photo)

find the cat. By that time it was getting really smoky so I had to leave. To the best of my knowledge everyone was out. But the smoke was so bad and the flames were getting pretty decent by that time."

Novak next looked to the adjacent building, a green house that had been remodeled into commercial businesses on the ground floor and an apartment upstairs. The apartment building was so close that he was sure it also would burn.

He checked on the ground floor and found the offices there vacant.

"But someone said they thought someone was upstairs and I went up and found a woman in the apartment up there," he said. "I got some of her belongings as she was gathering herself, getting dressed to be out doors, and escorted her out of there. By the time I got her out, the Schultz building had gone up so quickly that the corner of that green building was

starting to catch fire."

Novak said he had never experienced anything like the fire before and credited his training for taking over and guiding him.

In fact, by Tuesday — whether by nature or because he had told the story so many times already — Novak was pretty blasé and matter-of-fact about the entire incident, especially for a man whose family would be left without a husband and father if something had happened to him.

"I always kind of keep them tucked in the back of my mind somewhere," he said. "But I mean, I just wanted to help out everyone I could. That Schultz building, I don't know if it's because of how old it was or what, but it went up quick. So I wanted to be sure no one was inside and get anyone who was inside out of there."

Other efforts

Today, Novak has a

new respect for both fire and firefighters. He and a member of the Bayfield fire crew were treated for the smoke they inhaled at the scene.

"From being in that Schultz building, my throat was burning and my lungs didn't feel the best," he said. "That smoke was really nasty. I was hacking a bit so once everything was squared away I went and got checked out to make sure everything was on the up and up. It was precautionary."

"It's not like campfire smoke," he said. "It's nasty for sure. There were some areas — I don't have any protective equipment for that kind of stuff — the upstairs was just black, rolling smoke. I couldn't venture into that. From my training, I know that can overcome you fast."

Novak said he was most impressed by crews from the Bayfield, Red Cliff and Washburn volunteer fire departments, who had no chance

How to help

The Bayfield Chamber and Visitor Bureau has established a relief fund at Chippewa Valley Bank. People who wish to donate can send a check directly to the the Bayfield Chamber and Visitor Bureau at P.O. Box 138, Bayfield WI, 54814, donate online at Bayfield.org/fire-relief-fund or visit a Chippewa Valley Bank office. Make checks payable to Bayfield Chamber and Visitor Bureau, and in the memo write "Bayfield Fire Relief Fund."

Encore Resale Store also is organizing donations of clothing and household goods. For questions about items it is taking, please email info@corecr.org or call 715-779-3455.

to save the apartment building but were able to protect the adjacent building, which was being remodeled to house a new real estate agency.

"They really did save that building, the green building, which was astonishing," he said. "It shows how great a job they did because I was sure that building would burn down."

Coming together

Even as the fires were still burning, the Bayfield community began work to help the victims who were left not just homeless but entirely bereft of clothes and other possessions.

Local hotels — the Bayfield Inn, Legendary Waters Resort and Windseeker rentals — offered residents shelter, and Manypenny Bistro and Andy's IGA made sure they and firefighters were fed.

By Monday evening, the Bayfield Chamber and Visitor Bureau had established a relief fund to help the 15 residents and Kati Anderson, the chamber's marketing director, said people began donating as soon as the fund was announced.

"That's why Bayfield and even the surrounding area are so special,"

Anderson said. "The people here are always so willing to jump in and help during a crisis. We're really seeing an outpouring of support. We have people donating online, walking into the bank and donating. It's really humbling to be a part of it."

Anderson said she was proud of local businesses that stepped up to help the apartment building's families.

"They had no hesitation," she said. "Everyone jumped in. Even Mayor Gordie Ringberg was directing traffic out there on the day of the fire."

For his part, Novak was back on the job this week, still coughing and still worrying about those same residents — and downplaying his role in the rescue.

"I don't think I probably saved anybody," he said. "I maybe, let's say, motivated people to get out."

"It's a sad situation," he said. "I feel bad that they lost all their belongings and their place to stay. In all likelihood a couple of those cats probably perished and I know those residents have been really dwelling on that. It's just a sad situation for everyone involved."

» MOWING

FROM PAGE A1

Since Appleton led the state by being the first municipality to adopt No Mow May, at least seven more communities have passed similar ordinances or resolutions. In addition to

Ashland, the city of Superior is considering its own ordinance.

Parks and Recreation Director Sara Hudson said she looks forward to participating in the cause and encourages others to do so. Reducing mowing can cause increased retention

of soil moisture, reduced need for additional watering, less air pollution, less noise pollution and fewer greenhouse gas emissions, according to the resolution the city approved.

Researchers at the Gratton Lab at UW-Madison have

developed a free smart phone app called WiBee that's useful for citizen-scientists and food-producers to track local bees populations.

Growers and interested community members can use the app to collect high quality

data on wild bees and diversity on Wisconsin's fruit and vegetable farms, as well as non-crop habitats. Anyone is welcome to use the app.

"Every effort to protect bee populations is significant," Radke said.

» CENTER

FROM PAGE A1

Luttinen said more than the pool is at stake. The non-profit Recreation and Fitness Resources organization that operates the center also organizes swimming classes, the Point to La Pointe race between Bayfield and Madeline Island, martial arts classes, sailing lessons and other events.

"What can this community do to keep this resource in place?" she asked.

Recreation and Fitness Resources is urging community members to email the school board and to show up at the meeting, either in person or on the Zoom, to fight for the center.

"Losing the Bayfield Recreation Center would be an enormous loss to the communities it serves, and it would not likely ever be replaced," the organization posted on social media.

Recreation Center Executive Director Jacob Kaiser said Recreation and Fitness Resources officials only learned of the proposal to sell the facility when it came out of the district's Buildings and Grounds Committee on April 12 as a recommendation to the full



Kelsey Peterson of Madeline Island, right, swims on her back with caregiver Elaine London of Bayfield. Peterson, a quadriplegic, said the Rec Center's pool offers therapy she can't get anywhere else. (Rick Olivo/Staff Photo)

board.

"That is really the first we have heard of any of this," Kaiser said.

He also was told that school officials did not wish to discuss renewing a lease with RFR when the current agreement expires in June.

"They told us they didn't want to enter negotiations on that," he said, agreeing that stand was essentially an eviction notice and that school officials hadn't said exactly why they

were taking that stance.

"The only thing we know is that they have just completed a strategic plan that has not been shared with the community and one of the things they have said is that they don't feel they are getting the value out of the building as a school," he said.

Kaiser said that perspective is "interesting" in light of the fact that RFR was holding swimming lessons for all elementary school students,

about 200 kids all told.

"Also the middle and high school alt-education classes utilize the facility for working out and swimming, and then students also have the ability to come and utilize the facility as well as members. Right now, about 90 of the students are taking advantage of that," he said.

Kaiser said he does not know how else the facility could be used if it is sold.

"That is the big question, what their intentions are," he said.

It is a question that went unanswered during a meeting with District Administrator Beth Papp last week, he said.

"It could not operate as a for-profit. There is not that base here," he said.

Kaiser said the Rec Center was built by Bayfield philanthropist Mary Rice in 1986 and given to the Bayfield School District. He said the center ran into financial difficulties and in 2005 the school sought to sell it, leading to a referendum that resulted in the creation of the non-profit

Recreation and Fitness organization.

Since then, the center has weathered a number of financial issues and has built up its roster of services and activities available to the community. Today it offers many of the same things that a YMCA would offer in a larger city — fitness and weight-training, a racquetball court, sauna and hot tub, skate park, and classes of all sorts. Membership are available from about \$38 to \$54 a month, depending upon age and family size.

"We are still here, and we have been able to keep moving forward," Kaiser said.

That is the way swimmer Kelsey Peterson of Madeline Island wants the facility to survive. She is quadriplegic, but is still able to swim laps in the pool using just her arms while floating on her back, accompanied by caregiver Elaine London of Bayfield. She said her weekly swims are vital to her health.

"It is the only time that I can be out of my chair and weightless," she said. "It is exercise that feels

If You Go

- The Bayfield School Board will discuss and possibly vote on selling the Bayfield Rec Center at its April 25 meeting. The meeting will begin at 6 p.m. at 300 N. 4th St., Bayfield, or can be watched on Zoom at <https://zoom.us/j/99534042541?pwd=aHJldCsrWHkxZ082bVAZU-VJE3hMz09>
- Meeting ID: 995 3404 2541
- Passcode: 846663

very good."

Peterson said the activity is not important just to her physical health.

"I look forward to coming at least once a week. It helps me a lot with pain and feeling more independent. I am free in the water, enjoy that playful, explorative side of myself," she said. "It would be a huge bummer if I couldn't do what I do in this water. If the pool were to close, it would be a huge loss for the community. It is a place for people to stay healthy together, to heal together."

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