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| **Flames of protest: 18 days of uprising saw 48 fires in city, at losses of $3.9M** |
| **After Black Lives Matter outcry flared in late May, dozens of blazes hit buildings, vehicles and more** |
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| Richmond fire crews responded to 48 fires that officials believe were related to the Black Lives Matter protests during the first 18 days of the civil unrest in the city, causing at least $3.9 million in estimated losses, primarily in the Museum District and along the West Broad Street corridor, according to an internal Richmond Fire & EMS analysis of the department's responses during that period.  Eight buildings, six vehicles and 16 dumpsters were found on fire, in addition to 18 blazes involving trash, debris and brush between May 29, when the protests first erupted, and June 15, a fire official concluded from data compiled in a spreadsheet and made available to the Richmond Times-Dispatch.  "That weekend [May 29-31] for most of our members was a once-in-a-career event, and they met the moment," Richmond Fire Chief Melvin Carter said. "I am proud of each and every member that participated or supported the overall response."  Although fire crews were heavily engaged in responding to and extinguishing numerous fires, Carter said they did not divert department resources from being able to respond to other, non-protest-related emergencies during that period. "We were able to prepare and adapt to the risk," he said.  On the evening of May 30, at the height of that weekend's unrest, city firefighters battled a blaze at a home in the 600 block of Holly Spring Avenue in a neighborhood off Hull Street.  \*\*\*  The nearly $4 million in estimated damages does not include all content losses inside the structures that caught fire, such as the $350,000 to $500,000 in merchandise that the DTLR apparel and shoe store at 1500 W. Broad St. lost when the building they leased was destroyed by fire on May 31, according to a company spokesman. Fire officials listed the structural damage at $200,000, with an additional $200,000 in content.  That fire also damaged two adjoining businesses, Game Stop and Starbucks Coffee, both of which have closed temporarily. The building that housed all three businesses has been stripped down to a shell and is being rebuilt.  The marble-clad headquarters of the United Daughters of the Confederacy at 328 Arthur Ashe Blvd. sustained the greatest structural damage at $1.25 million, according to fire department estimates, but the figure does not include content losses. Priceless Civil War artifacts reportedly were destroyed in the May 31 fire, including a camp flag that had been flown by Confederate Gen. Stonewall Jackson.  The fire department did not assess content damage inside the UDC building.  Workers have been on site for weeks and have restored the front exterior that was marred by smoke and flames. The interior is being restored. On Thursday, extensive scaffolding could be seen rising to the ceiling from a rear, open door used by contractors on site.  The Rite Aid store at 520 W. Broad St. also was severely damaged by fire on May 31. Fire officials estimated $1 million in structural damage with an additional $1 million loss in content. Rite Aid spokesman Chris Savarese declined to provide a dollar figure of the store's losses; the company leases the building.  "We really haven't been talking about damages that occurred during the protests," he said.  The store has remained closed except for the pharmacy since late May as restoration work inside continues. "We anticipate reopening the whole store in October," Savarese said.  Of the six vehicles that were burned, the most significant fire involved a GRTC bus that was set ablaze during the early morning hours of May 30 at West Broad and Belvidere streets, a loss placed at $250,000. About two hours earlier, protesters also set fire to a vehicle valued at $15,000 parked outside Richmond police headquarters at 200 W. Grace St.  The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives has offered a reward of up to $5,000 for information leading to the person or persons responsible for setting the GRTC bus ablaze.  Another vehicle fire at 309 N. Monroe St. on May 31 that caused $6,000 in damage scorched the exterior of a commercial building there, but the blaze was contained before it could enter.  Vehicles also were set ablaze in the first block of Clay Street, 304 W. Marshall St. and in the first block of East Grace Street causing damages estimated at $5,000, $38,000 and $12,000, respectively, according to the fire department's analysis.  Dumpster fires were set at a wide range of locations, and one of those blazes scorched an exterior wall of Virginia Commonwealth University's Brandt/Rhoads Hall, a dormitory for students, a university spokesman confirmed. Fire officials placed the damage at $1,000.  Asked whether the dozens of fires significantly endangered the lives and safety of city firefighters, Carter replied, "All uncontrolled fires are inherently dangerous. However, every arson fire we encounter brings the potential dimension of intentional harm to life and health."  The United Daughters of Confederacy has kept a low profile since the fire at their organization's headquarters, and numerous requests to learn the extent of their loss and future plans have gone unanswered.  UDC Executive Director Mary Valentino said in an email that she forwarded the newspaper's information request to UDC President Nelma Crutcher, who Valentino said is the "only spokesperson for the UDC." Crutcher, who lives in Tennessee, has not responded to inquiries first made in July.  The Washington Post reported on June 3 that Civil War artifacts were destroyed in the UDC fire, including a Stonewall Jackson camp flag, but the newspaper did not attribute the source of the information.  Jeff Bowden, a national spokesman for DTLR, said the company is interested in reopening its Broad Street store once the property owner rebuilds the structure. Bowden said the company lost "upwards of $350,000 to a half-million dollars" in store fixtures, apparel and shoes at the Broad Street location.  About 45 of the company's stores across the country "were totally looted" during the protests and riots, Bowden said, and two locations - including the Richmond store - were destroyed by fire.  "We're finalizing everything with our insurance company and with the landlords, so that we can try and get some of them open by October, and a few more by the end of this year," he said. "And we look forward to opening all of them by the first quarter of 2021."  City firefighters have responded to additional protest-related fires as the demonstrations in Richmond continued. But the volume and severity of those incidents have declined. The one exception was the weekend of July 25-26, when a dump truck used to block protesters' access to Richmond police headquarters was set on fire; numerous dumpsters were also set ablaze.  "All of the arson fires that occurred during the identified time frame are currently under investigation," Carter said. So far, no arrests have been made.  mbowes@timesdispatch.com |

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| **Henrico is first Va. locality to hold jury trials after being halted statewide in March due to pandemic** |
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| When a Henrico County jury was seated recently to decide a criminal case for the first time since the outbreak of COVID-19, the courtroom environment was vastly different from what their predecessors experienced before the pandemic triggered a statewide prohibition on jury trials more than six months ago.  Each juror was outfitted with a cloth face mask and plastic face shield. They sat in a jury box with plexiglass barriers that walled off each seat. Mandatory breaks were enforced every two hours, and the jury box and other parts of the courtroom were disinfected thoroughly between each break. And when jurors began their deliberations at the end of the two-day trial on Sept. 16, they were escorted to a large room that provided an abundance of space for social distancing 12 people.  Henrico authorities implemented extraordinary measures to ensure the safety of the jurors, which allowed the court to begin chipping away at the sizeable number of criminal jury trials that have stacked up since the Virginia Supreme Court issued a "judicial emergency" in mid-March that barred jury trials across the state.  The prohibition has been extended nine times and still is in effect, at least until Oct. 11. But the state's highest court has given the green light to eight localities to resume jury trials after the plans they submitted on how to safely proceed were approved by a panel of three justices.  In addition to Henrico, circuit courts in Richmond, Norfolk, Fairfax, Alexandria and the counties of Prince William, Stafford and Allegheny also have been approved. Of those, Stafford and Allegheny each have held one criminal jury trial in recent weeks.  Henrico Circuit Court was the first in the state to successfully conduct a criminal jury trial since the outset of the pandemic.  "I've got to praise the county, it has given us unlimited resources to upgrade our courtrooms and make them safe," Henrico Chief Circuit Judge James Yoffy, who presided over the county's first pandemic-era case, said, adding, "It went very, very smoothly. It took a little longer than normal, but we got there. There was not one juror who indicated they did not feel safe in the courtroom."  "It was a phenomenal effort by everybody; it really worked," added Yoffy, who noted that court personnel along with Henrico sheriff's deputies, which provide courtroom security, conducted a mock trial earlier to "iron out some kinks."  The attorney who represented the defendant also praised the proceeding.  "It went surprisingly smooth, to be quite honest," said Kevin Calhoun. The preparations and safeguards "kind of reassured all the jurors that this isn't something that was just thrown together, and they're the unfortunate ones that have to be there. They were really thinking about the members of the public, and they really wanted to make sure they were all safe and comfortable being there."  "Other than the jurors wearing masks, and me having to wear a mask while I was sitting there, it really didn't seem too far off from just the normal jury trials that we've done in the past," Calhoun added.  The court conducted a second jury trial last week that lasted three days, ending Thursday. The defendants in both of Henrico's jury trials were convicted.  The area's other circuit courts in the counties of Chesterfield and Hanover are still stalled by COVID-19 and are awaiting approval from the Virginia Supreme Court to approve their individual plans. Richmond Circuit Court was given the go-ahead on Friday.  Meanwhile, the number of criminal cases sought by prosecutors or defense attorneys throughout the region continue to rise.  Richmond Circuit Court had 238 jury trials on its dockets between March 17 and July 31. Most of them were continued, but some were settled in agreements or they were dropped after charges were withdrawn, said Richmond Commonwealth's Attorney Colette McEachin. Richmond now has at least 160 jury trials set between now and the end of the year, McEachin said, and that number will increase after the grand jury meets Oct. 5, McEachin said.  McEachin said it will be difficult to set any new jury trials before March 21 because of the current backlog, "and then once they resume they will each take longer to conduct because of COVID precautions."  Richmond Circuit Court Clerk Edward Jewett said the court typically convenes 120 criminal jury trials a year. The court has been preparing to resume jury trials and is now ready to proceed, Jewett said Thursday.  Once approved, "I think we'll be able to start up within a couple of weeks," Jewett said.  Richmond Chief Circuit Judge Joi Jeter Taylor was notified in a letter Friday from Chief Justice Donald Lemons that jury trials can resume in the city immediately, "provided the jury trial is consistent with and in strict conformity with the plan."  Chesterfield Circuit Court has about 41 criminal jury trials pending, "but the number ... is always a moving target, as cases are moving through the criminal justice process on a daily basis," said Chesterfield Commonwealth's Attorney Stacey Davenport.  "Our office, the Clerk, and the Court have been in constant contact and discussing preparing for the resumption of jury trials over the last several months, and I fully anticipate our ability to begin trying juries once the county's plan has been approved by the Supreme Court," Davenport said in an email.  Hanover Circuit Court, which has a case load significantly lower than its big-three counterparts, has about five criminal jury trials pending, said Hanover Commonwealth's Attorney Trip Chalkley. "We would be ready to go" once receiving the go-ahead from the Supreme Court, but adjustments would need to be made to the courtroom to ensure jurors were adequately separated," he said.  Even with the resumption of jury trials in Henrico, the circuit court still faces a daunting challenge. There are 45 criminal jury trials scheduled through Dec. 21, said Henrico Circuit Court Administrator Donna Menzies Sandefur. That doesn't include civil jury trials.  "I think we have juries scheduled every week, and I think we may even have two juries on [certain days]," Yoffy said. "We have two courtrooms available that we've outfitted for juries. So at the most, we can only have two juries at a time. And frankly, if we have two juries it's going to be an enormous task."  In a statement provided to the Richmond Times-Dispatch after being asked why only seven state localities have been authorized by the Virginia Supreme Court, Chief Justice Lemons said he often hears circuit court judge complain that "we are ready to go and the Supreme Court won't let us."  "More often than not, the first part of that statement is incorrect, and the second part is correct," Lemons said. "We are aware that this is a pressure to get cases tried to a jury. Our major concern is whether jury trials in a given locality can be held safely."  Lemons then listed the various participants of a jury trial that require adequate protection: citizens, deputy clerks, witnesses, deputy sheriffs, attorneys and litigants, and the judge.  Lemons said he reviewed what other states and the federal courts have decided to do, created a Jury Resumption Task Force to consider various issues, and received advice from the Virginia Department of Health. "At all times, our primary concerns has been the safety of our citizens, employees and users of the court system," he said.  The Virginia Supreme Court also is guided by directions from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, executive orders from Gov. Ralph Northam, and new regulations promulgated by the Virginia Department of Labor and Industry, Lemons said.  "To assist our judges, we have posted online issues they must consider in their plans," Lemons added. "And we have posted plans that have been approved for them to utilize. We have approximately 100 plans to review. We still receive plans that are inadequate under our guidelines. We are hopeful to be able to approve revised plans as they are received." |

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| **Gun sales in Virginia top 81,000 for June, a new high Va. gun sales top 81,000 in June, a new record, amid fears of virus, protests and defunding police** |
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| Virginia gun sales soared to historic levels in June, the second record spike in three months, in a tumultuous year **marked** by the long-term uncertainty of COVID-19, the economic turmoil it brought, protests over racial injustices and activists' demands to defund the police.  Estimated firearm sales based on mandatory criminal background checks on buyers have smashed monthly records this year - first in March with 80,228 transactions, and again in June with 81,204 transactions, according to newly released figures from the Virginia Firearms Transaction Center, which electronically conducts the checks on state retail gun purchases.  The June figure is the highest monthly total on record for any month since state police began tracking the data in 1990. It represents an increase of 157% over the number of transactions conducted during the same month in 2019.  Through June, there have been 410,493 firearm transactions in Virginia in 2020. That's 74,000 shy of the total for all of 2019, when 484,550 were conducted. If the current trend continues, Virginia will break the annual record of 505,722 transactions set in 2016.  Virginia firearms dealers say they believe a combination of events is driving the sales. At least one national gun control advocate largely agrees.  They say it began with fears that increased firearm restrictions passed by the Democratic-controlled General Assembly would dry up the availability of some guns and magazines.  Then the coronavirus struck, raising additional fears that the pandemic would lead to a breakdown in public order and economic ruin, which led to the government issuing $1,200 stimulus checks that some used to purchase firearms. The topper was the nationwide protests that in some cases have led to violence and destruction of property.  "It's a perfect storm," said Joshua Jennings, owner of Guns, Gear & Ammo in the Danville-Martinsville area.  In just the first six months of this year, Jennings said sales have been so extraordinary that "we've had to buy two times what we bought all of last year, just to keep stuff in stock."  "We've had some unusual buys, and what I mean by that is buyers who ordinarily would not statistically be likely to enter a gun store," Jennings said.  That includes many first-time buyers, who Jennings estimated account for one in 10 of his customers. "And we're getting somewhere between 40 and 45% of those people who are completely and totally unfamiliar with firearms," he said.  Virginia's numbers mirror what is occurring nationally. FBI statistics released this week show that 3.9 million background checks were conducted in June, the most since the National Instant Criminal Background Check System was activated in 1998. And like Virginia, the previous national record occurred in March, when 3.7 million transactions were conducted.  Because there is no national or state database of gun sales, the background check numbers do not correlate directly to the number of sales because more than one firearm could be included in the transaction. But the background checks are regarded as the best available proxy for gauging sales and consumer demand for firearms.  The June record adds to what has become Virginia's longest sustained rise in monthly sales ever. It began in December with 73,849 transactions and so far has continued through the first six months of 2020. This year's total is up 92% over the same period in 2019.  "Civil unrest, rioting, looting and calls to defund the police are unquestionably motivating factors of why this trend is increasing," **Mark** Oliva, director of public affairs for the National Shooting Sports Foundation, told the Associated Press. "Americans are right to be concerned about their personal safety."  The NSSF, a trade association of the firearms industry, has estimated that 40% of those purchasing firearms this year are first-time buyers, based on a survey of firearm retailers.  "Politicians who entertain notions of defunding police departments are the same ones who call for strict gun control and even outright confiscation," Oliva told the AP. "These figures aren't push polls. They are representative to Americans from all walks of life who are taking action and taking responsibility for their rights and their safety."  But David Chipman, a retired agent with the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives - who now works as senior policy advisor for the Giffords gun control group - has a different perspective.  Chipman said he does not dispute the gun industry's characterization of the sustained boom in gun sales that has extended for an unprecedented number of months. "I think that's real," he said.  But as a former ATF agent and SWAT team member who still carries a concealed weapon, he questions whether people with little or no knowledge of firearms snapping up guns for personal protection is a true solution to quelling their fears in the current environment.  "I know the amount of training and rigor [that is required] if you are going to use a firearm as a defensive weapon," Chipman said.  Because the tremendous demand for firearms has caused a supply shortage, new gun owners buying in a time of crisis may not get their first choice of weapons, and "are buying whatever's left, out of panic or fear."  "You could be left with a weapon that isn't the best for self-protection, you don't know how to use it, and you really haven't thought, before this moment in time, that you needed a gun in the first place," Chipman said. "You're sort of building your ark after the flood has started."  Chipman said the public's feelings of fear or loss of control is understandable. "It's what we're all feeling; these are scary times."  "But I can tell you, as someone who's been around guns all my life, the gun does not solve that problem," he said. "One's self-defense can't be centered primarily in winning a gunfight. That was never my operational plan at ATF. It was always like, 'How do we avoid gunplay?'"  Jerry Cochran, owner of Trader Jerry's, one of Virginia's largest federally licensed firearm dealers, said the people buying firearms at his stores are of every race, creed, color, ethnicity and social group.  "A lot of far-left liberals are seeing that they are their only line of self-defense," he said. "If you're going to defund the police, you got to figure out some way to protect yourself. And when they turn on the TV, that's all they hear all the time now. Riots and defund the police."  The gun-buying frenzy, coupled with the pandemic, has led to a supply shortage of some firearms and ammunition nationwide.  "The problem is, there is a finite supply of guns," Cochran said. "They're doing the same social distancing at the [firearm] manufacturing plants. There's supply problems in getting parts. I'm sure some of the parts come from China and other countries."  Cochran said one ammunition manufacturer told him that he couldn't provide the ammo Cochran requested "because they didn't have the boxes to put it in. When you shut down the whole country and then try to get it back up a little bit, it's pretty tough."  "During this time when there are record gun sales but a minimum number of guns, imagine if the supply chain" was fully operational, Cochran said. "How many Americans would want to be arming themselves a little bit more thoroughly?"  mbowes@timesdispatch.com  (804) 649-6450 |