



CITY OF HARRISONBURG
FIRE
DEPARTMENT

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Man Arrested Following Arson at Harrisonburg Hotel

HARRISONBURG, Va. – A Harrisonburg man is under arrest facing multiple felony charges after investigators determined he intentionally set a fire in a hotel room earlier this week.

Harrisonburg Fire Department units were dispatched Tuesday, May 20, for an automatic fire alarm in the 1400 block of East Market Street. While enroute, the incident was upgraded to a structure fire with smoke coming from one of the rooms. Units arrived at the location in under two minutes and found a fire contained by a functioning fire sprinkler system. HFD personnel were able to quickly extinguish the fire, and water and smoke damage were limited. The hotel was evacuated while personnel confirmed the fire was extinguished.

During the HFD Fire Marshal Office investigation, John Wesley Whitaker Jr. admitted to starting the fire. He was initially transported to the hospital for evaluation before being released and then taken into custody by the Rockingham County Sheriff's Office.

"Starting a fire in an occupied building is an extremely serious matter," Captain Luke Walker of the HFD Fire Marshal Office said. "We would like to thank the Commonwealth's Attorney for their willingness to support the pursuit of these charges, as well as the Harrisonburg Police Department and Rockingham County Sheriff's Office for their support during the investigation."

Whitaker was charged under Section 18.2-77 *Burning or Destroying a dwelling house, etc. (Attempted)*, and Section 18.2-81 *Burning or Destroying personal property*.

"The rapid response of our personnel, combined with a properly functioning fire alarm and fire sprinkler system, thwarted what could have easily become a catastrophe due to this individual's actions," HFD Fire Chief Matthew Tobia said. "We are committed to the safety of our community and assertively pursue anyone who intends to do harm or disrupt community well-being."

The Harrisonburg Fire Department is an ISO-Class II All-Hazards agency providing essential emergency and non-emergency life safety services to the public who live, work and travel in Harrisonburg. More information about the Fire Department is available on-line at www.harrisonburgva.gov/fire or on Facebook®, Twitter® and Instagram®.

The City of Harrisonburg is centrally located in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. It is home to approximately 56,879 people. More information about the City of Harrisonburg is online at www.HarrisonburgVA.gov.

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