

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

What happens next with the burned-out Tustin blimp hangar?



Officials investigate the rubble of the historic Tustin Marine Corps Air Station blimp hangar on Wednesday, November 8, 2023 after a fire destroyed the WWII-era structure. (Photo by Mindy Schauer, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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Within 36 hours of a [blaze that ate through a World War II-era blimp hangar at the shuttered Tustin Marine Corps Air Station](#), the city's mayor was calling on the Navy to expedite tearing down and cleaning up the remains.

"We're relying on the Navy's resources to clean this up," Tustin Mayor Austin Lumbard said Wednesday. "I know the community doesn't want to look at a half-burned remnant of what was the hangar and we owe it to the community to take it down as safely and quickly as possible.

"It needs to be cleaned up quickly for health reasons and general optics," Lumbard said. "The city cares, and I think the Navy cares, too."

What caused the fire to ignite early Tuesday morning will be investigated by Orange County Fire Authority and Navy officials; [Wednesday morning firefighters continued to monitor the smoldering ruins while it was still unsafe for crews to get inside](#).

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A day after the north hangar at the Tustin Marine Corps Air Station caught fire half the building remains standing in Tustin, CA, on Wednesday, November 8, 2023. (Photo by Jeff Gritchen, Orange County Register/SCNG)

The north hangar, with its nearby southern twin, is still owned by the Department of the Navy, though the Tustin base was shuttered in 1999 and hundreds of its acres have since been developed with housing and other community uses. The two mostly wooden hangars – each 17 stories tall, 1,000 feet long and 300 feet wide – were built in 1942 to house blimps for patrolling the West Coast for Japanese submarines and later used by helicopter squadrons. They are listed on the Register of National Historic Places.

The south hangar, leased and maintained by the city of Tustin, remained untouched.

Officials from the Navy’s Base Realignment and Closure program said Wednesday their greatest priority remains the health and safety of the community and with city officials and local agencies they are evaluating any health risks from the materials used 80 years ago and since to preserve and make the wood fire resistant. Asbestos-cement board was also used as a structural material, Navy officials said, and many surfaces are known to have been finished using lead-based paint.

The South Coast Air Quality Management District released Wednesday night that “samples of debris and ash were collected in public areas near the hangar, and results of laboratory testing show the presence of asbestos.” People are being encouraged to limit their exposure to smoke, ash and dust from the fire.

“There are just general concerns about the materials used 80 years ago and in the maintenance of that hangar throughout the decades,” Lumbard said.

His children attend schools nearby and he’s heard other concerns from parents and the community, he said. [Late Wednesday night the Tustin Unified School District announced schools would be closed Thursday, Nov. 9.](#)

Health officials did put out a [local smoke advisory for Wednesday](#) encouraging especially people who are sensitive to air quality issues to avoid the ash and smoke from the fire.

A clear timeline on when the clean-up will begin has not been established, Lumbard said, but the discussions with the OCFA and the Navy are expected to continue through the week.

Many in the community are mourning the loss of the hangar; the twin structures have been a landmark in the region for so long.

The city will ensure the south hangar remains safe, Lumbard said. Since leasing it, the city has provided regular maintenance and site security and the massive space has been used for filming moves and commercials, community events, celebrations and even as the site of a half marathon.

“With this disaster of this magnitude and unfortunate as it is, we’re evaluating if there are additional measures we can take to maintain its safety and make sure nothing like this happens to

the south hangar,” Lumbard said. “With the loss of the north hangar, the sentiment of keeping the south hangar, for a number of reasons, has grown since yesterday.”

What happens in the future with the 85 acres that included the north hangar is the next big question. In the past, anything from a [baseball stadium](#) to a big concert or amphitheater venue has been bandied around. [The property was once slated to become a regional park](#), but little movement ever happened in that direction.

“With the hangar now gone that opens up different possibilities,” Third District Supervisor Don Wagner said. “The footprint of the land may be different and maybe an amphitheater does work and maybe the county can do a park and fund it.”

Besides the now burned-out hulk of the hangar, there are at least 60 other buildings on the Navy property that also have been allowed to “lie fallow” and will need to be dealt with, the mayor said.

Lumbard is confident an agreement can be reached with the Navy.

“I think the Navy cares,” he said. “I think in recent years they just haven’t taken a proactive approach in managing the site. We will definitely be calling them to do so now.”

Navy officials said Wednesday since spending nearly \$3 million in 2013 to fix part of the hangar’s roof damaged by wind, it has continued with regular maintenance and inspection. More recently, the city had performed a structural assessment on the north hangar, they said, and was working with the Navy to present alternatives for the hangar as part of its master plan.

“I don’t want folks asking, ‘Why is the city doing nothing?’ We want to move the ball forward,” Lumbard said. “I’m confident the Navy doesn’t want to keep it forever. They have no use for it.”

In recent years, the north hangar property has become the “hole of the donut,” as Lumbard put it, with the city developing around all sides of it.

“The regional park was first promised and the community deserves some green space,” he said. “Now, that the hangar has burned down, it would be important to commemorate what was there.”

Rick Nelson, vice president of the Tustin Area Historical Society, agrees with the idea of a park and a memorial dedicated to the base’s history, but he’d like to step that up a notch.

“It’s obvious there should be a museum there that commemorates the two hangars and what they did for our community,” he said. “It’s a new opportunity because we didn’t think the hangar would disappear.”

As funding, he sees a possibility of developer-in-lieu fees or even a goodwill gesture from the Navy.

“Maybe the Navy,” he said, “would want to help support the history as well.”

Staff Writer Nathan Percy contributed to this report