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Lightning strikes spark sky-high damages



JUSTIN LAQACE / SUBMITTED PHOTO

Lightning brightens the downtown sky on Friday.

By Lindsey Wiebe

FRIDAY morning's downpour lit up by rapid-fire bursts of lightning gave early risers quite the show — but for some Manitobans, those bolts from the sky can strike far too close to home.

In fact, the house is precisely what got hit for at least 41 people whose residences caught fire due to lightning in recent years.

In Manitoba, more than 150,000 lightning bolts have touched ground this year. Lightning strikes on power lines cause hundreds of outages annually. Forest fires sparked by bolts of lightning are a common woe for fire crews.

But nearly 130 unlucky residential, commercial, and other properties were also set ablaze by lightning over the five years ending in 2009, Manitoba's fire commissioner reported.

Those fires caused nearly \$11.5 million in dam-

age to homes, businesses, sheds and garages, as well as a school, an airport, a community hall and a church — \$8.1 million of that was attributed to four fires at industrial manufacturers, and \$1.2 million solely to the 41 residential fires.

In Winnipeg, lightning rods aren't mandatory under building codes, a city spokeswoman said.

That doesn't mean the rods aren't lurking in some city buildings, at least the newer ones.

Modern lightning rods are largely hidden away, built into the roofs of newer homes and commercial buildings. They "aren't quite as obvious visually as they were on the old barns with the four-foot rods," said Douglas Franklin, president of Thompson Lightning Protection.

Franklin said residential homes are "still a significant part of the market" for his St. Paul, Minn., business. Lightning rods will "virtually guarantee" no lightning-sparked fires, said Franklin, but you'll still need surge protection inside to prevent

fried appliances. The cost of a lightning-protection system for a new house can start at around \$1,000, he said.

Peter Tessier, of the Insurance Brokers Association of Manitoba, said lightning protection is standard under home insurance plans. "It's one of those major things that can happen, particularly out on the Prairies, that you want coverage for."

For Manitoba Hydro, lightning strikes on lines caused nearly 500 power outages last year, and closer to 600 outages in each of the years prior.

Special wires strung along the tops of major transmission lines give them some protection, but that's not the case for the hundreds of thousands of kilometres of other lines, Hydro spokesman Glenn Schneider said. Hydro encourages people to plant shorter tree species under lines to minimize storm-related problems.

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