

## When Lightning Strikes, Be Glad the Public Employees Are There

Written by H. Bruce Miller  
Wednesday, 28 July 2010 13:24

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I enjoy dramatic weather, such as a good thunderstorm, but yesterday afternoon things got a little too dramatic for comfort.

I arrived home around 4:15 to find my street full of fire trucks and police cars and people standing around watching the action. The house of one of my neighbors had been hit by lightning.

According to [KTVZ's account](#), the home of Deak and Barbara Preble was a total loss because of fire and smoke damage. Fortunately nobody was injured and the fire didn't spread to any nearby houses (including mine).

"We're just pleased the authorities were able to get here fairly quickly," Deak Preble told KTVZ's reporter.

The experience got me thinking about what might have happened if we had privatized firefighting in Bend instead of having a municipal fire department.

Before you dismiss that as a ridiculous idea, remember that the private-enterprise approach to firefighting has been tried in many places throughout history. The results generally haven't been very good.

In ancient Rome, Marcus Licinius Crassus – described by [one website](#) as “ambitious and an entrepreneur – the kind of man [Ayn Rand](#) might have appreciated” – made a fortune with his free-enterprise firefighting business. When a fire started in the city he'd rush to the scene, buy up the adjacent properties at bargain prices and then have his crew put the fire out.

In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, London insurance companies started their own firefighting brigades. They wouldn't put out a fire unless the owner of the blazing house had bought insurance, as

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indicated by a plaque mounted on the property.

In New York and other colonial American cities, insurance companies paid fire brigades to fight fires. Rival brigades would race each other to get to the scene first, and sometimes the building would burn down while the brigades fought over who would get to put out the fire.

What's the point of all this? Simply that private enterprise doesn't always do a better job than those much-despised (by conservatives and libertarians) public employees, and that privatizing public services isn't always the best idea. Private enterprise, by definition, looks out for private interests, and those don't always coincide with the public interest.

Arguments over political philosophy aside, I'm glad Bend has a well-paid professional city fire department – and I'm also glad we're protected by professional city police instead of a crew of private sector rent-a-cops.