

LOCAL

Bail set at \$20,000 for homeless man charged in Duluth synagogue fire

He tried to spit the fire out, complaint says, but when it wouldn't go out he walked away.

By [Brooks Johnson](#) and [Pam Louwagie](#) Star Tribune staff writers

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DULUTH - The man arrested for setting ablaze a historic Duluth synagogue was charged this morning with causing negligent fires.

Matthew J. Amiot, whose address was listed at a Duluth homeless shelter, faces one felony and one gross misdemeanor. He appeared in St. Louis County District Court at 11 a.m., where Judge Eric Hylden set bail at \$20,000.

A criminal complaint says Amiot set fire to a variety of combustible materials early Sept. 9 in a two-foot wide alcove between the Adas Israel Congregation Synagogue and a smaller structure on the property called a sukkah.

The complaint says Amiot, 36, gave police a statement admitting to starting the fire, explaining that he tried to spit on it to put it out, but when it would not go out he walked away. The complaint says Amiot was seen walking behind the synagogue at 2:13 a.m. and seen walking away at 2:15 a.m., looking back at flickering flames.

By the time emergency squads arrived at 2:22 a.m., flames were three feet high. The building began to collapse at 3:39 a.m.

Though Amiot was booked into the St. Louis County Jail on Friday on suspicion of felony arson, Monday's charges included only one felony count of negligently causing a fire with property damage of more than \$2,500 and one gross misdemeanor count of negligently causing a fire resulting in bodily harm. He faces a maximum of three years in prison for the felony and a year in jail for the misdemeanor if convicted.

St. Louis County prosecutor Vicky Wanta said the investigation is ongoing and she could not comment further.

Officials said at a news conference Sunday that they had no reason to believe the blaze was a bias or hate crime, but that the investigation was still continuing.

Nobody was in the synagogue at the time of the blaze, but Fire Capt. Ben Gasner was knocked unconscious by falling debris. He was treated for a concussion at a hospital, the complaint said.

The nearly 120-year-old synagogue was deemed a total loss and damage to property is estimated to be at least \$117,000 for the structure and at least \$250,000 for religious items.

Prosecutors argued for a high bail citing Amiot's previous convictions, multiple failures to appear in court and his lack of a stable address.

Amiot, who has nearly a dozen misdemeanor convictions for trespassing, burglary and theft, was animated during Monday's hearing and appeared to push papers onto the floor in frustration after hearing the bail amount.

Natasha VanLieshout, an attorney representing Amiot, said in court that he denies the allegations and "was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Deb Holman, a street outreach worker at the shelter listed as Amiot's home, said they have never had problems with Amiot.

His next hearing is set for 8:30 a.m. on Oct. 8.

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