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Fire damage put at \$2 million

The Boston Globe

Investigation continuing on source of blaze

By Brenda J. Buote, Globe Staff | January 11, 2007

As donations pour in for the dozens of victims left homeless by last week's fire at the Longview at Georgetown luxury apartment complex, state fire investigators continued early this week to try to figure out why the damage was so extensive.

"Code compliance officers in the office of the state fire marshal are continuing to work with the Georgetown Fire Department to see if there are any lessons to be learned in order to prevent a similar occurrence, either in this complex or elsewhere in the Commonwealth," said State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan. "It is important to understand why there was this much damage in a sprinklered building."

The five-alarm blaze destroyed one of seven apartment buildings at the Longview complex last Wednesday morning and left 58 people, including eight children, homeless. No one was injured.

According to Georgetown Fire Chief Michael Anderson, the damage estimate is \$2 million.

Anderson said investigators have not been able to pinpoint the cause of the fire, which broke out shortly after 9 a.m., when many of the tenants had already left for work.

The fire was jointly investigated by members of the Georgetown Fire Department, the Georgetown Police Department, and State Police assigned to Coan's office, Anderson said.

"We know the fire started on the balcony, but I don't think we'll ever know the ignition source," said Anderson.

"We were able to rule out foul play and faulty wiring, and we know that the person who lived in the third-floor apartment where the fire started had smoked out on the balcony the night before.

"Statistics show it usually takes about six to eight hours for a fire to

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flare up after careless disposal of a cigarette," Anderson added. "We're not sure that's the cause, but it's the only thing we were not able to rule out."

Anderson and Police Chief James Mulligan, who serves as the town's emergency management director, said on Monday that they were planning to meet with Town Administrator Stephen Delaney this week to review what happened.

The meeting will likely include a discussion about reported problems with low water pressure.

Firefighters at the scene said poor water pressure hindered their initial efforts to extinguish the fire. Delaney said he's gotten "mixed information" on the issue.

Anderson and Mulligan both said they did not think that better water pressure would have made a difference.

"As soon as the firefighters got to the scene, they had water pumping immediately," Mulligan said. "There was a loss of pressure for a few moments, but it wasn't a significant issue."

The police chief added: "Everything went smooth as glass. Police, fire, the Red Cross, and state emergency management officials responded immediately. Not one individual received a scratch and not a single pet was lost."

In all, 18 pets -- dogs, cats, and one rabbit -- were rescued from the 24-unit building that was destroyed by the fire.

All of the animals were cold, wet, and soot-covered when they were recovered, officials said. They were treated at Muddy Creek Animal Care Center, a full-service veterinary hospital in neighboring Rowley, and reunited with their owners.

Meanwhile, concerned neighbors continued to give to local relief efforts. Some donated material goods -- food, clothing, or linens. Others chose to make a monetary contribution to the local Red Cross or the Longview Apartments Relief Fund at the Georgetown Savings Bank.

"Tons of people called to find out what they could donate and when they could donate," said Susan Vincent, wife of Selectman Matthew Vincent. "The response has been overwhelming."

Many of the displaced fire victims did not have renter's insurance to offset the financial hardship of their losses, according to Jay Foley, spokesman for the American Red Cross of the Merrimack Valley in Haverhill.

Several are now staying with relatives or in hotels, he said. Others chose to move into unoccupied units in the six remaining buildings on the complex, which is just off Interstate 95.

"I have been amazed by the great community spirit shown by the outpouring of help for the fire victims," Anderson said. ■

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