

NEWS

Fire, police investigate deadly Gage Street fire as displaced tenants assess loss, seek answers

**Jeff A. Chamer**

Telegram & Gazette

Published 2:45 p.m. ET May 15, 2022 | Updated 6:09 a.m. ET May 16, 2022

WORCESTER — Jim Li stood outside 5 Eastern Ave. using a stick to clear the sidewalk of debris Sunday, the morning after a four-alarm fire left two people dead and three others injured next door at 2 Gage St.

Li, the owner of both buildings, was waiting for Worcester police and fire officials to arrive to continue their investigations of the deadly blaze and for some of his tenants to gather what they could of their belongings.

“My heart goes to the people who were injured and to their family,” Li said.

The fire, which broke out around 3:30 a.m. Saturday, destroyed 2 Gage St. and also damaged 4 Gage St. and 5 Eastern Ave.

Police and fire department personnel working at the scene Sunday declined to comment and did not provide the identities of the deceased.

The Worcester District Attorney's Office referred inquiries to Worcester police and fire.

A review of the police scanner transmissions provides some idea of what police saw as they responded early Saturday.

A city police officer, who arrived on the scene before the Fire Department, radioed to a dispatcher that the back of the building at 2 Gage St. was on fire.

Amidst a chaotic-sounding background punctuated by loud voices in the scanner transmission, a woman is heard shouting, "Stay right there!"

The officer told a dispatcher that she had "two people on the stairs on the third floor."

Police officer rescues resident

Another officer who had apparently entered the building, responded to a radio transmission asking where he was.

"Fourth floor," he said. "I've got a stubborn tenant not wanting to leave. I'm getting him out of here. We're coming down now."

The first arriving fire crews reported heavy fire pouring from the building and immediately called for a second alarm.

Shortly after their arrival, firefighters reported two people trapped on the third floor. They called for an ambulance to the front of the structure for a person who had fallen from the building, according to radio transmissions.

Saturday's fire was the first fatal fire in the city since three lives were lost in February 2021 on Jacques Avenue.

The Gage Street fire went to a third alarm fewer than 10 minutes after firefighters arrived. The officer in charge ordered the blaze be battled from outside the building and that no one enter the structure.

While the extent of the damage to the two other buildings is unknown, tenants at 5 Eastern Ave. were only able to enter the building Sunday to retrieve their belongings with a Fire Department escort.

Li said that 21 people lived in 2 Gage St. and 12 lived in the Eastern Avenue building.

“I feel saddened and heartbroken,” Li said.

He said that the two buildings were not insured because when he reached out to insurance companies, he was told the structures were too close together and were not eligible.

Tom Natoli, a tenant at 2 Gage St. who was not home when the fire broke out, said he was feeling overwhelmed by the situation.

Natoli, who got off of work late Saturday, arrived as firefighters were pouring water onto the roof of the building.

Difficult situation for tenants

Natoli, who works for a security company in Westborough and who was living with two other roommates in the building, said that he is staying with a friend who lives down the street from his former residence.

He said he's unsure about the condition of his belongings as the Fire Department was still in the process of investigating the matter.

Steven Feliciano, a tenant at 5 Eastern Ave., said that the Red Cross, which was on the scene to provide support to the tenants, gave those displaced \$515 to cover “food, shelter and clothing.”

He said that while he appreciated the extra funds, it did “absolutely nothing” as it cost him over \$200 alone to buy new clothes.

Feliciano and his two other roommates, including one who has been undergoing dialysis, had to quickly evacuate and leave behind their belongings including his identification and credit cards.

He said he will be staying with his brother, while one of his roommates is staying with a friend and the other at the hospital so that they can continue dialysis.

Feliciano was one of several tenants who returned to retrieve his belongings. Guided by a fire investigator, he was able to get some of his possessions including his wallet, a laundry basket and a container filled with shoes and other items.

“I just wish the landlord would take responsibility,” he said.

As police officers and fire investigators began to arrive on the scene, animal control and emergency medical services also arrived.

Animal control was seen taking a large black object out of 2 Gage St., but declined to speak to a reporter.

Li said that if animals were in the building, he had no knowledge of them since he had policies against tenants having pets.

Paramedics were on the scene to provide care to police officers and fire investigators entering and exiting the buildings.

The experience was difficult for tenants in neighboring buildings including Ashley Demauro, who said she wanted to “offer my condolences,” to the families impacted by the fire.

She said she woke up in the early morning to see a text from a friend who works in a hospital indicating they could see the fire from their workplace.

“I had a hard time sleeping last night just knowing I could still smell the smoke all night long,” Demauro said. “And just knowing that I live a couple houses down and two people lost their lives. It just makes me really sad.”

For Feliciano, the apologies he and the other tenants received have all been “lip service,” he said.

“We still gotta move on with our lives. We still gotta go to work,” he said. “We still gotta figure out how we're gonna live.”

However, while in a difficult situation, Feliciano said he is going to try and take advantage of the situation and assistance they are receiving.

“I planned on moving this year,” he said. “I see this as an opportunity for me, so I'm gonna try to take advantage of that. This is an opportunity given to me.”

Worcester Police Lt. Sean Murtha said Sunday there was no new information available about the fire.