



News Release

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Investigators Offer Clues Concerning Fire

GRAND ISLE, LA – Late in the evening, on September 26, 2012, State Fire Marshal investigators responded to an apartment complex fire in the community of Grand Isle which claimed the lives of two adults. An investigation into the circumstances of the fire led investigators to suspect an accidental fire.

Shortly after 9:30 p.m. that evening, firefighters from the Grand Isle Volunteer Fire Department were dispatched to an apartment building fire on LA Hwy. 1. The site of the fire was the former Rusty Pelican economy lodge which has existed in the community since the 1960's. Upon their arrival, firefighters found the southwest corner of the complex to be engulfed in flames. After extinguishing the fire, it was determined that two occupants residing in two separate units on the second floor had not escaped the fire. Grand Isle Fire Chief Aubrey Chaisson requested assistance from State Fire Marshal Investigators to determine the origin and cause of the fire.

The fire caused structural failure to the second floor balcony which was the only access to the units occupied by the victims. Firefighters and investigators had to cut away adjacent walls in order to gain access to the affected units. The remains of two adults, identified as 60 year old Belle Brandl and 46 year old Timothy Foret, were recovered from the scene and released to the Jefferson Parish Coroner's Office. Based on the fire patterns observed, the fire was determined to have originated on the exterior of the building.

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Through investigation it was discovered that a number of combustible items were stored in an outside area below the second floor balcony. Witnesses provided independent accounts as to the presence of bicycles, a bicycle cargo cart, plastic tarps, a small barbecue pit and large plastic containers housing plastic video game cases. While many of the materials were consumed by the fire, investigators were able to confirm their presence by sifting through the fire debris.

Investigators have determined the area of the fire's origin to be at or near the doorway of unit 21, which was occupied by Belle Brandl. The presence of rubber and plastics in the items stored below the balcony provided sufficient fuel load to support rapid fire growth and spread. Investigators believe the fire, which burned at extremely high temperatures, very quickly overtook the balcony on the second floor, igniting wooden surfaces and the supporting wooden structure, trapping the occupants of units 21 and 22. The scene investigation revealed that both victims were equipped with handheld portable fire extinguishers and both victims apparently discharged those devices in an attempt to escape the burning structure. Both victims ultimately retreated into the confines of their respective units where they perished.

Due to the severe fire damage in the area of origin and the absence of electronic or eyewitness accounts, investigators were unable to identify the initial source of the fire's ignition. Investigators were able to rule out natural causes, as well as faulty electrical wiring as potential sources of ignition. Investigators have, however, concluded that human intervention played a role in the fires ignition and development. While investigators have no evidence to suggest an intentionally set fire, they are unable at this time to rule out an intentionally set fire as a potential cause. Likewise, investigators have been unable to rule out unsafe smoking practices as a potential source of ignition. Investigators were able to confirm the presence of smoking materials in and around the area damaged by fire. Because of the inability to definitively exclude all other possible causes at this time, the cause of the fire is being classified as undetermined.

In the spring of 2012, the State Fire Marshal's Office, along with other public entities received a complaint concerning the condition of the apartment complex. That complaint, which characterized the facility as "an extreme fire hazard", triggered two separate site visits by deputies with the Fire Marshal's Office. On each of those visits deputies were not successful in locating the owner of the facility nor were they able to locate anyone in a managerial role. They noted that the office for the facility was closed and contained what appeared to be items in storage. During one of the two visits, they were able to talk with a tenant or a guest of the facility who confirmed the presence of a smoke detection device within his unit.

Deputies later learned that the property owner had fallen into a delinquent status on his property taxes and the property had been sold in order to collect the arrearages. The new owner, upon acquiring the property, quickly sought a permit from the Town of Grand Isle to begin remedial measures on the facility. That permit was issued in May of 2012 and significant improvements to the facility have been underway since that time. Among those improvements was the acquisition of new smoke detection devices and fire extinguishers for the occupied units.

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During the fire investigation, investigators were able to confirm the presence of both of these devices at the facility. However, because of the location of the fire on the exterior of the structure, these devices offered little help to the victims. Investigators have concluded that the conditions of the facility, as outlined in the complaint, played no factor in the cause and development of the fire that claimed these two lives.

State Fire Marshal Butch Browning stated, "We have committed the full resources of this agency in seeking answers to this very tragic loss of life. We have worked closely with the Town of Grand Isle and with Jefferson Parish Officials to provide an explanation as to the fire's cause. Although there are still unanswered questions, we believe that we have been able to explain how the fire may have started and certainly how this fire developed to a point that it trapped two people."

This investigation remains active.

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