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## Officials: Blowtorch used by workers sparked Edgewater apartment complex fire [video]

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STAFF WRITERS | THE RECORD

A massive fire that raged for hours on Wednesday night, reducing a luxury Edgewater apartment complex to a pile of charred rubble and leaving more than 500 homeless, started with a blowtorch that was being used to fix a leaking pipe, officials said on Thursday.

Maintenance workers who were doing plumbing repairs in the 408-unit Avalon at Edgewater complex initially tried to tamp down the flames themselves on Wednesday afternoon, waiting 15 minutes before they called 911, officials said. Nearly 24 hours later, after what turned into a grueling night for hundreds of firefighters battling one of the largest blazes in Bergen County history, the destruction of the building where the fire began was nearly complete.

With the remnants still smoldering Thursday afternoon, attention turned to construction methods that fire officials said had likely accelerated the conflagration. And Governor Christie, who visited the site in the evening, said state officials would investigate whether building codes were followed.

It was the second fire at the site in 14 years, and it consumed the possessions of hundreds of residents, killed pets and prompted a large outpouring of help for the 500 whose homes were destroyed and another 520 who have been temporarily displaced from surrounding buildings. Four people suffered minor injuries, officials said: two civilians and two firefighters.

“The fact that there was no loss of life here is really a blessing,” Christie said, likening the fire to the one that destroyed the Seaside Heights boardwalk in 2013 and pledging the state’s support to the borough.

The borough’s fire chief, Thomas Jacobson, said firefighters had rescued three people on different floors.

“The hallways are banked floor to ceiling with smoke,” Jacobson said. “These guys have to claw their way in the dark, trying to find these apartments and get these people out.”

They had to move quickly, fire officials said, because the building’s wood framework made it susceptible to collapse.

Firefighters and construction-industry representatives have fought for years over whether there should be stricter regulations on the building method, called “lightweight construction,” used at the Avalon property and similar complexes, experts said.

“The occupants of this building probably didn’t realize they were basically living in the middle of a lumberyard,” said Jack J. Murphy, a past president of the Bergen County Fire Chiefs Association who teaches fire safety at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. “The only saving grace was that this didn’t happen at 2 a.m.”



CHRIS PEDOTA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Police Chief William Skidmore said workers were using a torch while fixing a leak and doing plumbing repairs when the fire started.



TARIQ ZEHWI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Smoke still rises from the apartment complex as firefighters from many departments continue to pour water onto the site.

The truss style of roof framing allows sections to be built of lighter lumber on the ground, then hoisted into place. The method is generally considered to be faster and less expensive to install.

“If it was made out of concrete and cinder block, we wouldn’t have this problem,” Jacobson, the Edgewater fire chief, said at a news conference on Thursday before Christie’s appearance. The building’s fire sprinklers were on and the building was up to code, the fire chief added.

Michael Feigin, chief construction officer for Avalon Bay, the company that owns the complex, said that there was nothing unusual about how the complex was built and that it “was built in accordance with the fire and safety codes applicable at the time.” The complex’s parent company, AvalonBay Communities, also has apartments in Bloomingdale, Hackensack, Lyndhurst, North Bergen, Rutherford and Wood-Ridge.

But fire chiefs interviewed on Thursday said lightweight construction forces firefighters to work in dangerous conditions.

Christie said the state Department of Community Affairs will investigate and make sure codes were adhered to before deciding whether the state should reexamine its standards. He said he visited to reassure displaced residents that they won’t be forgotten and that there are state resources available to help them.

“That’s why I’m here, to make sure that people do not forget,” he said.

Officials said the displaced were staying in local hotels.

A second building in the complex that was saved remained vacant on Thursday evening, the Avalon Bay construction official said, adding that the company was working with the Red Cross and local officials to help displaced residents.

“We are awaiting a final determination from the Fire Department as to what portion of the community may be inhabitable moving forward,” the spokesman said.

About 240 apartment units were destroyed, while 168 were saved, Edgewater Mayor Michael McPartland said. He said he witnessed four firefighters rush into the building to save a woman as the facade was coming down.

“There were some scary moments and great moments here last night,” he said.

By Thursday morning, flames were still shooting up from some parts of the gutted building. Several household items, including picture frames, items of clothing, and scorched documents, littered the sidewalks surrounding the development. The streets around the Avalon were caked in ash.

Firefighters spent hours on the scene, taking breaks to devour doughnuts and coffee. Just after 2 p.m., crews started setting up large, generator-fueled flood lamps around the complex to provide light for firefighters who planned to continue soaking the still-smoldering debris.

“Our hearts go out to everyone who’s affected by this,” McPartland said, noting that about 500 first responders had come to the fire.

The blaze at 102 Russell Ave. began around 4:30 p.m. Wednesday. Police Chief William Skidmore said that Avalon maintenance workers were using a torch while fixing a leak and doing plumbing repairs when the fire started. He said that it had been ruled accidental. But when asked about the more than 15 minutes it took for workers to call 911, he sounded a cautionary note, saying people should call emergency responders immediately in such cases.



TARIQ ZEHAWI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Firefighters from many departments continue to pour water onto the fire site.



NBC NEW YORK

Firefighters continue to douse hotspots in the smoldering remains of the Avalon apartment complex in Edgewater.



NBC 4 NEW YORK

A photo made from an aerial video from NBC 4 New York shows the spread of the fire.

"That's what we're here for," he said. "We have the equipment."

Although the fire was considered under control around 11 p.m., about 230 firefighters from 35 departments remained at the scene until nearly 7 a.m., Bergen County Fire Coordinator Larry Rauch said. That includes fireboats from New York City, Jersey City and the state police.

About 240 families from the Russell Avenue apartment building were displaced by the fire, according to the Red Cross. An additional 168 families from a neighboring building were evacuated and may be able to return if the building is deemed safe and utilities are restored.

"It's devastating, that's all I can really say," said resident Dina Gomez, 47. "I'm lost, but I'm glad that I'm here and able to tell you that."

Barry Reich, 59, came to the site where his children live after they called on Wednesday to tell him about the fire.

"I saw smoke, and at first I thought it was probably just a basic fire," he said. "But all of a sudden it spread so quickly to the second and third floors."

He said the fire continued to spread for two hours, prompting him to try to enter and rescue a cat still in the apartment. There was too much smoke, he said. "I couldn't get to the cat," he said, "so I just opened some of the windows."

An hour later, he said, he saw flames coming from those windows.

"They lost everything — probably even the cat," he said. "But thank God my kids were able to get out."

He was dismayed that the fire spread so quickly but said he had been concerned about fire safety because the building's walls were so thin.

"You could hear everything in those walls," he said.

Mohanad Hasan, 38, and his 10-year-old son, Zain, also lived in the Russell Building at Avalon.

"My family heard the alarms and ran out in their pajamas," Mohanad said Thursday. "It's just a nightmare. You don't think that when you go out and then come back home that you'll find everything gone."

at the Edgewater Community Center at 1167 River Road for displaced families. The Cliffside Park-based Bergen County Humane Enforcement also opened a pet shelter at the neighboring American Legion.

At least one local hotel where some families were staying, the Comfort Inn at 725 River Road, was flooded with donations — enough to fill an entire room and a table by the entrance. An online fund set up by borough officials had generated nearly \$7,000 in donations by late Thursday evening.

The destruction attracted a constant stream of cars traveling along River Road past the site of the fire Thursday. Several motorists stopped to shoot pictures and video.

Unseen by police or firefighters, some ventured past police tape into a nearby cemetery to get a closer look at the destroyed complex. They brought cameras and took photos as they wandered among the tombstones, coming close to the building's unstable wall. An officer came and added more police tape at the cemetery entrance, but by that time they had already left.

McPartland urged the public to stay away while emergency workers continue to clean up the site. The borough's schools will be closed again today, and buses will not run to Leonia Middle School and High School, which Edgewater students attend, according to a posting on the borough's school website.

The apartment complex is on the site of the former Alcoa aluminum plant, where millions of aluminum cans and other products were manufactured until the plant closed in 1967. The plant, which was vacant for three decades, was demolished in the late 1990s in a project that included a cleanup of PCBs that had contaminated the land.

That fire, also one of the largest in Bergen County history, spread quickly and engulfed homes across the street on Undercliff Avenue. Nine homes were destroyed and several others damaged, along with more than a dozen cars. Thirty-nine families were displaced.



VIOREL FLORESCU

Firefighters on the scene of the raging fire.



VIOREL FLORESCU/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Firefighters on the scene of the blaze.

“The guys did a good job containing it to that one building,” Jacobson said, referring to Wednesday’s fire. “The last time we had this fire, we lost nine houses on the other side of the street.”

Englewood Fire Chief Gerald Marion said that when he arrived at the building on Wednesday night, he immediately thought, “Here we go again.”

Marion added, “It seems that every time there’s a memorable fire, it’s Edgewater.”

Marion commended the dozens of firefighters who helped to “surround and drown” the complex so the flames wouldn’t spread to other buildings, calling their efforts “heroic” as they battled a blaze as embers fell like snowflakes all around them.

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