

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

AUGUST 18, 2008

District Attorney Risa Vetri Ferman, Conshohocken Borough Police Chief James Dougherty, Conshohocken Fire Marshall John McGrath, and Pennsylvania State Police Captain David Young announce their findings related to the joint investigation into the multi-alarm blaze of August 13, 2008 at Millenium Stables and Riverwalk at Millenium in Conshohocken.

On Wednesday, August 13, 2008 at 4:52 PM the Montgomery County Emergency Operations Center received a call reporting a fire at an active construction site known as the Millennium Stables located on Washington Street, in Conshohocken, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. First responders encountered heavy fire in five story wood frame building under construction.

The fire quickly spread to two occupied buildings in the Riverwalk at Millennium complex and was not brought under control until 10:30PM. Fire officials reported over 300 firefighters responded from dozens of fire companies from throughout the region. The fire displaced three hundred seventy-five (375) residents of the complex and an unknown number of business persons.

Local, county, and state fire investigators responded to the scene to investigate the origin and cause of the fire. Investigators determined the fire started at the location where construction workers had been utilizing an oxy-acetylene torch to remove a series of steel frames that had been incorrectly installed.

Investigators at the scene found there were five buildings under construction with three configured into one "u-shaped" structure. The bottom floor of the buildings, designed as the garage, was constructed of steel and concrete. This structure served as a platform for four, wood-framed floors. The buildings had been framed and with floors,

exterior walls and a roof in some places. The construction had not yet reached the point of installation of drywall partitions or any electrical systems. Some electrical lines had been run into the building to operate electric power tools and work lights. Gas lines had been installed in some places, but they were not connected to the gas main.

Six steel frames had been installed along the top edge of the cement that were designed to be used to anchor cement balconies. These frames had been installed incorrectly and had to be removed. In order to cut them out, workers used an oxy-acetylene torch to cut them off. An oxy-acetylene torch is a gas powered tool that uses an extremely hot flame to cut steel. Such a tool typically throws off hot sparks and molten metal known as "slag". The workmen used the torch to cut off the frames working from south to north, but were unable to complete the removal because they started to run out of oxygen. The workmen stopped cutting at approximately 2:30 PM and returned to the location approximately an hour later to check the scene. At that time, they saw no evidence of any residual problem from their work with the torch and they left the site shortly thereafter. Approximately one hour later, witnesses from a nearby building noticed a small fire in the area where the workmen had been cutting earlier. They immediately called 911 and firefighters responded.

Investigators concluded that the origin of the fire was the molten metal (slag) and sparks generated by the workmen using the oxy-acetylene torch to cut the steel frames. Pieces of hot slag can lodge in cracks or joints at a site and not be visible to an observer. Investigators believe that hot slag and sparks generated by the torch were left at the scene but not obviously visible to the workers when they left. Over the hour following the workers' departure, this material heated the wood to its ignition temperature and eventually ignited the wood frame of the building.

After an extensive investigation, fire investigators determined that the cause of the fire was accidental. They concluded the fire was caused by the ignition of ordinary combustibles ignited by sparks from an oxy-acetylene torch.

The fire scene has been released. The District Attorney concluded no further action is warranted by law enforcement.

Approved for release:

Risa Vetri Ferman