

02022591-01



Nearly 300 firefighters from 39 regional departments battled the Sept. 2, 1985, blaze for 12 hours.

Fire: Passaic feels impact 25 years later

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before the fire.
Nearly 300 firefighters from 39 regional departments battled the blaze for 12 hours. Yet the scorched buildings smoldered for several weeks, according to the city Fire Department. A Secaucus firefighter, William Koenemund, 65, died after suffering a massive heart attack, and 11 others were injured.

Residents left homeless by the blaze flocked to the Red Cross shelter at Passaic's Holy Rosary Church. A Red Cross report shows that 400 people – nearly 160 families – registered for some type of aid or relocation in the fire's aftermath.

Retired Battalion Chief Victor Trentacost, a lieutenant at the time, recalled that the department kept a fire engine at the site for a month after the fire. "At that particular time, [the fire] was the biggest catastrophe in the country," he said.

The two boys suspected of setting off the blaze were charged as juveniles and convicted of arson, criminal mischief and reckless endangerment.

Fire sparked reform

Henry Tiritilli, a retired deputy chief who was a young firefighter on the scene that day, said the blaze underscored the department's staff shortages, which led to a significant increase in manpower, a change in standard operating procedures and the purchase of updated apparatus.

There also was significant improvement in radio communication, maintenance of sprinkler systems and building inspections, according to retiring fire Capt. Ray Schmitz, who was a firefighter on the scene.

"After the fire, the department definitely increased in value and concern for the city, probably 200 percent," said Michael Rainer, former zoning board chairman and former municipal utility authority commissioner.

The fire's impact reached far beyond its physical destruction. A steady economic decline began with the loss of hundreds of jobs and a chunk of city tax base and ratables. The alleyway where the fire was touched off today is the center aisle of the ShopRite parking lot. The supermarket, in a strip mall, and a Verizon warehouse across the street mark the only significant redevelopment on fire-ravaged Eighth Street in 25 years.

Progress toward rebuilding the area into a thriving business zone has been slow. Almost immediately after the blaze, in October 1985, city officials began planning to rebuild what's called the lower Dundee neighborhood, aiming to promote residential and retail development and deemphasizing heavy industrial buildings and low-income housing that had characterized the area before the blaze.

Rainer said an early plan considered building 150 housing units, wrapped with a riverfront walkway. Officials urged a speedy redevelopment, but by 2003 the only major change was the development of the ShopRite shopping center built in 1994 and the Verizon warehouse built in 2000.

New hope surfaced in 2004 when the city's redevelopment agency classified the area as "in need of redevelopment" and began searching for a developer, but plans that seemed promising fell through.

Hope for rebuilding

A partial foundation of the industrial complex at 100 Eighth St. sits isolated, engulfed by weeds on barren land.

"There was always the intention of hoping to rebuild, but it was a question of whether the owners were in a position to do that," former Mayor Marge Semler said.

To move forward with development, the property owner and developer would need to come to an agreement and submit a plan to the redevelopment agency and planning board for site plan approval, according to Rick Fernandez, executive director of redevelopment.

Rainer said environmental issues stopped the area from being developed. Not only was the site contaminated, but it remains part of a flood zone.

But owner Richard Ellis, who inherited the property from his father two months before the fire, cites other reasons for the halt in redevelopment: mainly high taxes – \$163,520 on the unimproved piece of property – delays in getting an approved cleanup plan from the state Department of Environmental Protection and economic difficulties.

"The major problem is that it's difficult to sell property unless they approve a cleanup plan," Ellis said, adding that the DEP has now agreed to one.

Ellis said there are several good prospects for the property, even during the recession. He declined to comment further as negotiations are pending but said, "We hope to do this as soon as possible. We're not going to lag after this period now. We're going to aggressively try to sell the property."

Rainer said the problem involved lack of planning, creativity and persistence in the redevelopment agency, even as Semler had reworked the site's infrastructure with new sidewalks, curbs and gas lines to make it ready for construction.

Today, Fernandez says the city is waiting on a plan from the property owner. With the ball in Ellis' court, longtime city residents and officials hope to revitalize the area in the upcoming years. "It's just sad that the negative has not been turned into positive in so many years," city historian Mark Auerbach said. "The fact is ... we don't have a whole lot to show for rectifying the tragedy that manifested itself. It's killing a very great city."

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Jersey's greener thanks to \$1.8M from DuPont

Pollution penalty funds 8,217 trees

By JAMES M. O'NEILL
STAFF WRITER

More than 8,000 new trees now line streets and soften school grounds in about three dozen North Jersey towns because of a \$1.8 million fine DuPont paid to atone for groundwater contamination at its facilities in Pompton Lakes and elsewhere.

The trees – 8,217 in all – have been planted over the past five years by the New Jersey Tree Foundation, a non-profit that received the DuPont fine, officials said last week.

The money was part of a larger resource damage settlement DuPont negotiated in 2005 with the state Department of Environmental Protection, which included preservation of nearly 2,000 acres of undeveloped land, mostly in South Jersey.

The settlement was intended to compensate for an estimated 2,400 acres of groundwater contamination at eight DuPont sites throughout the state.

Lisa Simms, the New Jersey Tree Foundation's director, used the DuPont fine money to create the Green Streets Program, designed to educate urban residents and students about the importance of urban forestry while creating lush green corridors and school grounds.

"One of my goals with this program was to show that giving resource damage fines to a non-profit is the best way to get the job done," Simms said last week. "We proved that by planting three times the number of trees we promised and by creating a program that successfully employed ex-convicts in 'green' jobs way before it became popular."

Joint effort

The tree foundation worked with the New Jersey State Parole Board to create transitional jobs for 36 parolees who made up the tree-planting crews.

Simms also required recipient towns to offload trees, get them to the planting locations, and assist with cleanup – saving money and enabling the foundation to provide more trees than planned.

Among the 38 cities and towns receiving trees were Paterson, Clifton, Pompton Lakes, Lyndhurst, East Rutherford, Rutherford and Wood-Ridge. The project targeted towns in the Lower Passaic and Arthur Kill watersheds.

The program was so popular that in 2006, the first season the tree foundation offered trees, Simms had to close out the application process after 24 hours. The same scenario played out each year since. "Towns are hungry for trees," she said.

The overall settlement with DuPont was designed to have the company protect land that replenishes groundwater reserves. The trees help that by absorbing storm water that might otherwise cause storm drains to overflow and dump raw sewage into streams and rivers.

Soak up water

Simms said a single 2-inch diameter tree can intercept 155 gallons of storm water runoff. Once the tree is mature, it can intercept more than 3,000 gallons of storm water.

The eight DuPont sites with groundwater contamination include a blasting cap facility in Pompton Lakes, which the company closed in 1994. The solvents TCE and PCE were used for decades at the site. The solvents made their way into the groundwater after improper disposal practices, and then migrated off-site.

More than two decades ago, the state detected that the groundwater plume had migrated under a neighborhood of about 450 homes, and in the past two years the DEP discovered the solvents have been vaporizing up through the soil into basements.

DuPont has been installing systems on homes to remove the vapors, and it is working on a plan to clean up the groundwater under the homes.

The solvents have been linked in some studies to kidney cancer and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in humans. In 2009 a state health department study found significantly elevated levels of those cancers in Pompton Lakes residents living above the plume. It could not conclusively link the elevated levels to the groundwater contamination, but it did not rule that possibility out.

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