

Residents survey fire damage

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Scorched debris litters the site of a huge explosion early Aug. 10 at the Sunrise propane facility near Wilson Ave. and Keele St. This photo, taken Aug. 11., shows a burned out transport truck frame in the top left.

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Northwest Toronto is picking itself up and dusting itself off after yesterday's massive propane explosion turned the area around Wilson Ave. and Keele St. into a wasteland.

There's a lot of dusting to do.

With some parts of the 1.6-kilometre evacuation area around the devastated Sunrise Propane Industrial Gases distribution plant still closed, mainly because of asbestos pollution, residents and business people are trying to get their lives back on track. Many say they don't have insurance to pay for the damage.

A series of blasts just before 4 a.m. yesterday flung bright orange fireballs into the air and sent about 12,000 residents, many of them elderly, fleeing from their homes, most still in their night clothes.

As of midday, police spokesperson Mark Pugash said about 50 people would not be able to immediately return because their homes are uninhabitable, with "significant damage" including blown-out windows and destroyed siding.

Those people are being housed in an evacuation centre at York University. Pugash said he didn't know of any houses levelled to the ground.

Officials from Enbridge Gas, Hydro, and the provincial Ministries of Labour and Environment gathered this morning to assess the damage to houses directly across the street from Sunrise.

One man estimated that "around 20 houses are written off for sure. Bricks are gone, windows are gone. . . propane tanks went through some of the houses."

As of the late afternoon, six buildings damaged in the blast had been deemed structurally unsound, leaving those residents facing the prospect of repairing their properties before they can return.

Mayor David Miller held a briefing and said asbestos was found at the blast site.

"The problem with asbestos is, when it's disturbed and becomes airborne, it becomes dangerous to people," Miller said.

"We are unable to allow people in the vicinity of the 100 or so remaining homes until the Ministry of the Environment approves our plan for cleanup. We hope to see results on that today."

Meanwhile, residents and business owners stood watching on a nearby patch of grass. Giennina Zonta, 72, clutched at her heart as she spoke of how she and her husband Antonio, 74, had complained in the past to the city about the propane plant. They never received a response, she said.

The Zontas have lived on Murray Rd. for 21 years. When the plant blew up, they ran from the house barely dressed and barefoot. Their feet were bandaged this morning. They spent the night with their daughters in Woodbridge and had to go to a Wal-Mart to buy clothes.

"Yesterday, I was angry," Giennina said. "Now, I'm so upset. I couldn't sleep all night, I couldn't eat. I wanted to see what happened to my house."

Jeff Green, who spoke out yesterday against "the absolutely insane danger of having that propane facility so close to a community" is another person who can't get back into his home. He was wondering why today.

"The police are talking about being worried about the air quality and asbestos," Green said. "But I haven't seen a single emergency worker in the so-called hot zone who's wearing any kind of protective clothing. So what's going on? Why can't we get answers?"

Ken Dryden, Liberal MP for York Centre, issued a statement today after visiting evacuees at the York University last night. "Again and again they asked, how is it possible that a propane facility like this was their next-door neighbour? Today, as citizens, as government representatives. . .their questions are our questions."

Mohammad Ilyas arrived at his convenience store, Andy's Variety, on a strip mall not far from the blast site to find his windows shattered, all the food in his freezers spoiled and a police car on guard to ward off looters. There have been reports of scattered theft from damaged buildings.

"I really appreciate them watching my store," Ilyas said. "I was worried about looting. I couldn't sleep all night."

But the damage was worse than he expected and he's not sure how he'll cope. "I don't have insurance. I can't afford it. You never imagine something like this will happen," he said.

"This was the first time I've closed my store in seven years. I don't even close it during snowstorms. I can't afford to."

The building manager, who gave his name simply as Rocco, shook his head as he looked at the devastation around the neighbourhood.

"This is so bad," he said. "The loss of business, the expense. . . so much aggravation."

Some people, like Mario D'Andrea, showed up at their houses just to pick up their wallets and a change of clothing so they could go to work. D'Andrea was turned away by police.

"Our life is upside down right now," he said. "I've got our kids at my mother-in-law's house, I've got a dog with no food ... it's just a mess."

Fears that the morning commute would be thrown into chaos were allayed as all lanes and ramps on Hwy. 401 reopened as the rush hour got under way. The TTC expected service in the area to be back to normal and GO Trains between Toronto and Barrie were running, with minor delays, after CN inspected the tracks near the Sunrise plant.

However, [some streets within a one-block radius remain cordoned off](#) after investigators from the Fire Marshal's office discovered asbestos. They include:

- Fredrick Teesdale Circle, buildings 201-226
- All of Murray Rd.
- All of Garratt Blvd.
- Wilson Ave., Regent Rd., Katherine Rd., Spalding Rd., and Plewes Rd.- from Murray Rd. to Ancastor Rd.
- Gilley Rd. from Garratt Blvd. to Ancastor Rd.
- Home Rd. west of Ancastor Rd.
- The west side of Ancastor Rd.

Hydro service south of Wilson St. to Hwy. 401 and Dufferin St. has been restored, and work continues on other streets. Enbridge Gas says it could be several days before the neighbourhood has normal service.

Bombardier told production workers and office staff at its nearby Downsview facility to stay home this morning, but shortly after noon, the company decided it was safe to resume work.

John Arnone, a spokesperson for Montreal Bombardier, said the decision to have employees return to work was made shortly after noon in consultation with fire, police and safety officials. The plant employs about 4,000 people.

Arnone said the Bombardier building, just north of the explosion site, had broken windows and buckled doorways but no apparent structural damage.

"Our objective is to ensure the safety of personnel and the viability of beginning the afternoon shift," he said.

Despite the scale of the devastation, the fire is believed to have claimed just two lives: veteran firefighter Bob Leek died in hospital after collapsing at the scene, and Sunrise employee Parvinder Saini is missing and presumed dead.

Early this morning, a Sunrise spokesperson offered condolences to Leek's family, and expressed hope that Saini would be found alive.

“We regret the discomfort and inconvenience caused to all those who have been effected by the occurrence,” said Dan Ronen, reading a statement from company president Sean Ben-Moshe.

“We are working closely with all of the agencies. We are grateful to police, firefighters and others who have been working so diligently to ensure the safety of the public and to ensure that any other damage is contained.”

Ronen said Sunrise didn’t know what caused the explosion, but neighbours like Merv Mostoway said the propane dealer “should never have been there in the first place.”

“It was only a matter of time,” said Mostoway, 73. “I knew one day something stupid would happen.”

With files from Sunny Freeman, Michele Henry, Noor Javed, Daniel Dale, Paola Loriggio, Laura Stone and The Canadian Press.

Asbestos FAQs

Asbestos debris littering the area around the Sunrise propane facility kept thousands of residents away from their homes. Here’s what you need to know:

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a fibrous mineral mined for its insulating properties. It was used as a thermal insulator in houses and other buildings, as a fire-proofing material and is contained in various other building materials.

How can it harm people?

Left undisturbed behind walls, asbestos poses little risk at all. But microscopic bundles of the fibres can become airborne during demolition, renovation or - in this case - explosion. Once airborne, asbestos can be inhaled.

What happens if I inhale asbestos?

Asbestos can cause a condition called asbestosis, scarring of the lungs that makes breathing laboured, a rare cancer of the lining of the chest and abdomen known as mesothelioma, and lung cancer.

How risky is it?

The percentage of asbestos in vermiculite insulation is actually fairly low, and left alone, or tightly bound in products such as floor tiles or siding, the insulation poses little danger at all. Once disturbed, according to Health Canada, the chance of developing a health problem depends on factors such as the concentration and duration of exposure.

What if my home is near the Sunrise propane blast?

Do not touch any debris from pressed board or particle matter, but call police at ___ 416-808-2222 to have the material analyzed.

For more on the health risks of asbestos, [click here](#).

Sources: Health Canada, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency