

Riddles in the ruins

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Houses sit directly across Murray Rd. in Downsview Aug. 11, 2008 from the rubble at the site of a propane explosion that drove about 12,000 people from their homes. A firefighter died battling the blaze and a second, unidentified body has been found at the scene.

Questions emerge about evacuation, the city's options and Sunrise Propane

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Dino DiMatteo looked across Ancaster Rd. Yellow police tape, and a police car, blocked Regent Rd.'s west side.

DiMatteo understood. Asbestos, he had heard, was in the air. Yet he and his neighbours were allowed to stand 10 metres from the so-called danger zone.

"It's blocked on that side," DiMatteo, 37, said, "and we're on this side. What's the difference between this side and that side?"

Francesco Cugliari, sweeping shattered glass outside his Hispana Travel and Tours store, wondered how five business cards for glass repair companies got left on a chair near his broken window.

How did the glass people get there before he did, he wondered. What if they had been looters?

"I understand they're trying to make a buck but they weren't supposed to be allowed (in) like this."

Police reported last night that an unidentified body had been found at the scene of Sunday's early morning explosions at Sunrise Propane, which also claimed the life of district fire chief Bob Leek. A Sunrise employee named Parmindar Saini had been reported missing.

Questions large and small nagged yesterday at the Downsview residents and business owners evacuated after the blasts.

Mayor David Miller asked one of his own: "Is it wise to have a propane facility of this kind immediately adjacent to residential properties? Obviously, in light of what happened, the answer is no."

He called for a review of the city's legal options. But if history is any indication, city council may not be able to take substantial action.

The former City of York and the old City of Toronto tried to regulate propane facilities in the 1990s. They were defeated by the courts and the Ontario Municipal Board, respectively. And the province, not the city, has the power to issue or decline licences to such businesses.

And questions arose about Sunrise yesterday. Since 1999, it has operated under several names. In 2002, it was successfully sued by a supplier after it failed to make a payment, then, according to a judge's ruling, forged a document to try to evade collection.

There is no indication Sunrise had safety problems prior to the explosion. But as residents returned to their homes, many again questioned its presence in their neighbourhood. At least a dozen threatened to sue.

In the morning, more than 50 neighbourhood residents who had not yet been allowed to return to homes near the Murray Rd. blast site gathered in small groups at intersections along Ancaster. They traded stories, quizzed police officers for information and wondered aloud about the condition of their homes. Some asked for permission to quickly feed hungry pets or grab medication.

John Santoro, 44, walked the street with pen and paper, asking people if they would consider joining a class-action lawsuit.

Many of them nodded vigorously. Within 45 minutes, Santoro, who rents out a home in the neighbourhood and whose father lives there, had gathered 12 names and phone numbers.

He will meet with a lawyer this afternoon, he said. "I think the municipality's got some responsibility here. And definitely the owners of the company. ... I'm seeing the lawyer at 3 o'clock, and we'll see what's going to happen."

Residents who live east of Ancaster, about 500 metres to the east of the Murray Rd. blast site, had returned home by morning. Few of their houses were damaged.

But the yellow tape and cruisers stood between those who live west of Ancaster and the bungalows many of them were worried about.

When the perimeter was moved one block west, to Garrett Blvd., at about 5 p.m., dozens of people were still unable to return.

"I'm concerned about the foundation, the base, the condition of the house. These are old houses, most of them," said Johnny Gabrielli, 40, who lives with his wife and two children in a house more than 50 years old on Spalding Rd.

Jason Ciffolillo, 27, was one of the few to have seen a house near the blast site. Though residents had been told to evacuate, Ciffolillo returned to his 70-year-old grandfather's Spalding Rd. house about four hours after the blast to look for him, thinking he might have been killed.

His grandfather, Ermino Santoro, had already been evacuated. But his home, Ciffolillo said, "is not inhabitable."

"It doesn't look structurally sound," Ciffolillo said; its windows are smashed, its ceilings caved in.

More than 10 headstones at Mount Sinai Memorial Park, a historic Jewish cemetery just west of Murray Rd., were also damaged.

The cemetery was closed yesterday.

Andrew Hay, who works for City-Wide Glass, reported getting about 20 calls for repairs in about four hours.

"Usually, you get that in maybe a week, two weeks," he said.