

The Gazette

Newspaper for Hasbrouck Heights • Little Ferry • Lodi • Moonachie • Teterboro • Wood-Ridge

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F.A.S.T. Team responding to report of squatters trapped in industrial building fire in Lodi on June 23, 2009. What is a F.A.S.T. Team? on page 12 • About Mutual Aid on page 13 • Mutual Aid in action on pages 14-15

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Mutual Aid Rallies Area



Even though things are quiet, an army of emergency services is always at the ready.

Residents first reported smelling smoke, then seeing thick black smoke rise from the building.

At approximately 5:10 p.m. on Tuesday, June 23, 2009, the Lodi Fire Department was dispatched to Garibaldi Avenue, and Meta Lane for a report of a fire at a large one story commercial structure with a two-story office area in the front.

Almost simultaneously, Hackensack Engine 2 received a verbal report of a fire from a passer-by and had Headquarters dispatch a full assignment. As the fire was in Lodi, all Hackensack units except Engine 2 were returned.

Units from both departments arrived to find a "well involved" fire in the rear of the vacant building.

The Lodi Fire Department was the first alarm assignment and was met with a large volume of fire from the building.

Smoke was rising in the sky as Lodi Chief Greg Telep arrived on the scene, reported a working fire and summoned mutual aid.

Chief Telep established command at the Meta Avenue entrance. Second Assistant Chief Louis Avola ran operations in the front of the building while Third Assistant Chief Matt Lombardi ran operations in the rear of the building.

A second alarm was immediately transmitted, and later increased to a third alarm.

The fire started in the rear of the building and spread forward to the rest of the building after jumping over a fire wall.

Lodi Tower 1 and Hackensack Engine 2 concentrated on the fire in the rear. The roof in the fire area collapsed soon after arrival.

Chief Telep stated that no one will lose their life over an empty building. All operations went defensive. An exterior attack was ordered. Master streams were set up.

Garfield Ladder 4 pipe and Lodi Engine 615 deck gun took positions on the east side.

Rochelle Park Tower 1, Hasbrouck Heights Ladder and Wallington Ladder took positions on Garibaldi Avenue.

As the initial attack was organized, Chief Telep is continuously advised by mutual aid: Zone 3 Coordinators Peter Donatello and John LaBarbara, Southern Bergen County Fire Chiefs Mutual Aid Association Chief Coordinator Ron Phillips, Zone 1 Assistant Coordinator & Bergen County Fire Marshal, Brian Henning, Central Bergen

coordinators Ron Pressler (CBM 2) and Stew Blank (CBM3), and as well as Lodi OEM* Ex-Chief Robert Cassiello, who are assessing risks, hazards and resources. (*Office of Emergency Management provides resources outside firematics.)

Early into the incident, unknowns and mis-information must be addressed. Just what was inside the building? Were there mini explosions? Were there oil tanks on the roof?

It was a chilling moment when Chief Telep received a report of two squatters inside. The F.A.S.T Team was assigned to investigate -- with strict orders not to take any chances. As they advanced, it was reported that the squatters were accounted for.

Chief Telep climbs Lodi Tower 1 located at the rear of the structure to make a visual assessment of the fire.

Although there are no raging flames showing at street level, there is plenty of thick, black smoke. The rear of the building is completely burned out with roof collapsed. Chief Telep confirms an inferno in the center heading to the front of the building.

Digging In

After discussion, command addresses several issues in short order:

- Assignments are made such as safety officers, etc.
- Fire equipment clogging the area is withdrawn.
- Heavy equipment is brought in to lift the roof to expose the seat of the fire, if necessary.
- Numerous EMS units also reported to the scene. Egress for EMS established.
- Work out communications problems.
- Garibaldi Avenue from Summit Avenue to Main Street is shut down.
- Call for Hackensack USAR truck to refill air tanks.
- Three rehab centers are set up: Meta Lane near the Command Center, where the fire originated, Zamalek Club Cafe on the opposite side of Garibaldi Avenue was taken over as a rehab station and Teaneck's Box 54 was set up on the corner of Garibaldi and Meta.
- Bergen County OEM Sgt. Barry Leventhal contacts Red Cross to handle possible evacuation of residents.
- Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) from Lodi and Rochelle Park were put to work.
- Bergen County Hazmat reports that air measurements were taken. No toxic fumes, but very high CO₂. They advise

firefighters in the heavy smoke to work under air.

- Firefighters not on the line are withdrawn to Meta Lane Command as a reserve to rotate as relief crews.

- With building contents still unknown, command puts Lodi 616 Foam Truck on standby, but decided it would not have any effect on this fire.

- Preparations are made to refuel working line equipment.

Command determines that with 45 psi (3,000 GPM) at the Lodi hydrants inside the water grid, there was not enough water to fight this fire; and it was apparent when the water supply quickly became a problem.

Water difficulties forced firefighters to stretch to larger mains outside the grid.

At 17:50 hours, Lodi Fire Command requested Wood-Ridge for one engine to cover Lodi Fire Headquarters. While en route, Engine 901 was redirected to a fire hydrant on Pleasantview Avenue in Hackensack and was the source for an three Engine relay with Maywood and Saddle Brook FDs.

This water relay fed the Rochelle Park Ladder Truck. Engine 901 pumped water for approximately 7 hours.

A similar water relay is established from Industrial Road with Lodi Engines 612 and 615 -- bringing much needed water to the scene.

As water became more plentiful, more lines were put in operation. Lodi's tower operated from the rear and a ladder pipe from Garfield was put in operation on the west side exposure.

Hasbrouck Heights put a ladder pipe to work from the front of the building as well as a deck gun from Lodi E-615 and several hand lines.

Chief Telep calls for a meeting of all Fire Chiefs, OEM, Police, DPW, Fire Marshal, investigators, EMS, etc., for a briefing and status report concluding, "Be safe and prepare for a long night."

Each Fire Chief meets with their respective departments. Firefighters are informed that the air has been tested and there are non-toxic fumes but high levels of CO₂. Telep orders all personnel operating on Garibaldi, or working in smoke, to wear SCBA's (*Self Contained Breathing Apparatus*.)

Late Tuesday, Bergen County Police erect freestanding light towers to illuminate the scene. Authorities order parked cars off local streets so that heavy equipment could be brought in to clear debris.

As thick smoke continued to cover the neighborhood, Lodi

Resources into an Army

CERT workers informed residents to close their windows, shut off their air conditioners and stay indoors, because the contents of the smoke was unknown and could be toxic. Some residents evacuated the area. Lodi Police clear the area of non-essential personnel. In a recorded message, police also advised residents they may experience low water pressure or brown water due to the fire.

The rising smoke could be seen for miles and attracted numerous TV news helicopters. The smoke rolled across nearby Route 46 and municipalities as far as Paterson and Clifton were receiving alarms for the smoke.

On the back property of the building were numerous sealed drums with no labels -- containing unknown materials. Although not near the fire, their presence raised concerns. Bergen County & Garfield Hazmat NJ DEP, EPA, etc., were at the scene continually monitoring the air.

Revising Tactics

Telep is concerned about the front of the building collapsing endangering firefighters, also the fire subsequently crossing Garibaldi Avenue to the apartment building across the street. He creates a safe building collapse zone.

Fire companies repositioned apparatus for the defensive attack on the front of the building.

Heights Ladder and Rochelle Park Tower disengage. Heights Ladder backs into an apartment parking lot and reconnects to a hydrant in the back. Rochelle Tower parked directly in front of the building. With teamwork, both departments realign the 5" lines and reconnect the Rochelle Tower to water from the Pleasantview hydrant.

Wallington Ladder and Garfield Tower position at the building's east corner. Lodi Tower remained in the rear.

In preparation of the advancing fire, three deck guns and water monitors from Maywood, Saddle Brook and Lodi were set up on the sidewalk across from the structure. The building windows were broken drawing wisps of smoke. Trees were trimmed for direct water stream access.

As evening set, the hidden fire had moved from the structure's rear to the Garibaldi Avenue side -- with smoke now streaming from the second-floor office windows.

This army of volunteer firefighters was ready.

The smoke condition from the second floor intensified about 9:30 p.m. Suddenly, firefighters

could see the "teeth-like" configuration of the flames through the windows as fire boldly broke through the second floor office wall and the roof near the building's front/center. Blast furnace heat could be felt across the street. Vicious flames inside the offices fought back streams of water, giving as good as it took.

From the building's center, the fire spread to the sides.

Command, concerned that the fire might pierce the wall of an adjoining building, sends in a team to investigate. The fire wall holds.

Garfield, Wallington, Lodi and Heights sticks poured water from above. Aggressively, Rochelle Tower went right up to the windows and fought the ferocious flames face to face. Three deck guns and water monitors continued the attack.

After about a two hour battle with the flames in the office section, all heavy fire was knocked down.

The fire was brought under control around midnight with fire crews attacking hot spots well into the morning.

Because of the additional mutual aid coverage, once the fire was under control, the Lodi Fire Department went out of service for rehab.

Firefighters stayed at the scene until past dawn to make sure it did not flare up. A flare-up at about 6 a.m. once again brought mutual aid units to the scene. Firefighters continued to douse the roof until 7 a.m. This time the fire was knocked down for good.

It was estimated that over 2,500,000 gallons of water was used over the seven hours to put out this fire.

On Wednesday morning, excess water was pumped out. DEP's Bureau of Emergency Response and the federal EPA responded to the fire scene to test air emissions and water runoff determining no hazardous materials were released.

At about noon, the Bergen County Arson Squad, along with

Lodi Fire Investigation/Prevention, began their investigation.

The building was condemned and heavy construction equipment was brought in for demolition, following the release of the scene by the arson squad.

More than 20 volunteer fire departments and about 200 firefighters were involved.

Departments at the scene included: Elmwood Park, Garfield, Hackensack (*paid department*), Hasbrouck Heights, Lodi, Maywood, Rochelle Park, Saddle Brook, Wallington, Wood-Ridge and Teaneck Box 54.

Zone coordinators organized the covering of Lodi firehouses in four hour shifts. Those volunteer departments were from: East Newark, East Rutherford, Fair Lawn, Little Ferry, Lyndhurst, Moonachie, North Arlington, Paramus, Ridgefield Park, Rutherford, and Secaucus.

Additional assistance was provided by: Lodi OEM & CERT, Rochelle Park CERT, Bergen County OEM and Police, plus EMS units from various towns.

There were no serious injuries, but three firefighters suffered minor injuries and were taken to HUMC.

The two-story brick building with wooden roof, used to house Interplast Universal Industries, a company that made vinyl-coated fabrics, is on the state Department of Environmental Protection's list of known contaminated sites. Officials said the fire posed no threat.

The building was sold in October. The building has been vacant for over 5 years prior to the fire and was not structurally in good condition. The sprinkler system was turned off by management years ago.

The neighborhood is a mixture of residential two-story apartment buildings and industrial buildings. *Selected photos provided by Paul Bassett. ###*

Back-to-Back Fires

This mutual aid army has depth -- with fire companies on stand by duty at Lodi Firehouses.

On Wednesday, June 24, 2009, at 2:15 p.m., the Lodi Fire Department was dispatched to Avenue B, for a confirmed working house fire.

Due to the previous night's fire, Lodi's covering towns were on scene and went to work immediately. Lodi's apparatus arrived a moment later and assisted. The second-floor fire was brought under control in approximately 25 minutes.

No one was hurt and the Avenue B fire is under investigation. ###



Over 2,500,000 gallons of water was used in 7 hours. That volume translates into:

10

Hasbrouck Heights Swim Club Pools. *Pool holds est. 270,000 gal.*

385

Tanker trailers. *Est. 6,500 gal. ea.*

6,250

Daily household consumption/family of 4. *EPA est. 400 gal./household*

An Invisible Army of Protection

Within minutes, this volunteer army is prepared to ramp up and meet any emergency.

The strength of this army is the South Bergen Fire Chiefs Mutual Aid Association (SBFCA), which helps to coordinate multi-department responses to large-scale incidents.

Harnessing the combined resources of Carlstadt, East Newark, East Rutherford, Garfield, Hasbrouck Heights, Little Ferry, Lodi, Lyndhurst, Maywood, Moonachie, North Arlington, Nutley, Rochelle Park, Rutherford, Saddle Brook, Secaucus, Wallington and Wood-Ridge, the South Bergen Fire Chiefs Association has over 75 years of experience in backing up that statement.

The South Bergen Association is comprised of three zones with two coordinators for each zone; Ron Phillips is the SBFCA Chief Coordinator.

In an emergency, a Fire Chief can draw upon the combined resources of these 19 communities with 2,000 firefighters, 22 ladders, 70 engine companies, 15 rescue, many EMS and numerous special teams such as confined space, multiple hazmat, dive teams,

foam units, etc.

Based on utilization and needs, the SBFCA is a flexible network that has extremely versatile capabilities in availability and duration. They are large enough to share the load of an immediate event.

Additionally, the zone coordinators insure that a vacuum is not created, by covering a fire department's community.

If required, they can go outside the system through Bergen County for additional resources.

This integrated system can ramp up to a county and state level.

Synergy

Chief Coordinator Ron Phillips stated that the strength of mutual aid is the large pool of highly trained and experienced volunteer manpower with a broad range of experiences. Benefits include:

1. At large scale incidents, fire fighters can rotate through a staging area allowing fresh hands to work, and the weary to rest, which helps to reduce injuries.

2. Expanded capabilities by developing specialized re-

sources.

For instance, Wood-Ridge developed a confined space entry team, bought the necessary equipment, trained on how to use the equipment, and is now able to respond to any town that has a confined space entry.

Other examples include:

- Mass casualty. See *The Gazette Newspaper, January 2008, pages 16 & 17.*

- Mass decontamination. See <http://www.hasbrouckheights.com/hhfd/decon/decon1.shtml>

Additionally, for the past 15 years, SBFCA has developed task force and strike teams.

Upon a request, a task force is deployed from each zone to meet at a central location and dispatched anywhere. The package has a coordinator, task force commander, one or two ladder trucks, three to five engine companies, rescue company/command post and ambulance.

A strike force is the same without ladder trucks, and focuses on long term relay pumping 5" hoses and working in rotating 12 hour shifts.

These task force and strike teams are now part of FEMA Planned Procedures.

The SBFCA is also available to respond to other parts of Bergen County and throughout the state under the State's Deployment Act.

Fire Chief Support

During an event, the Fire Chief of the affected community is "in-charge." Period.

As incident commander, that Fire Chief can draw upon these mutual aid resources. Proven protocols are in place for an organized ramping up.

When a call comes in, a Fire Chief can request additional support from neighboring towns.

As the needs grow, a zone coordinator assists the incident commander by supplying whatever resources are necessary.

As the size increases, so does staff and command. Mutual aid chiefs are assigned to strategic operations of the fire. For example: command for all four sides of the fire, staging, water management, etc.

This allows the Fire Chief in-charge, the ability to focus on "putting out the fire."

A few examples of this mutual aid concept in action include: 7 alarm 1977 fire Champion Building Products in Has-

brouck Heights; 4 alarm 1995 Napp Technologies chemical fire in Lodi; 7 alarm 1999 Borough Hall Fire in Hasbrouck Heights; 6 alarm plus a strike force from Mid-Bergen mutual aid 1997 National Liquidators in Lodi; 3 alarm 2002 Strawberry Warehouse plane crash in Teterboro; 4 alarm 2008 Yes Press in Little Ferry, etc.

Most recently, the 3 alarm June 23, 2009 industrial building fire in Lodi -- see pages 14-15 of this issue for details.

(A typical alarm is 2 engine companies, 1 ladder company, 1 rescue.)

United we stand, divided we fail.

Chief Phillips stated, "what is interesting is the shared service concept that has been talked up lately as a way to save money. The mutual aid fire service has been doing just that for 75 years.

"The mutual aid system can augment any town during their time of need.

There is, however, another part of the plan that, without it, mutual aid would not work.

Fire departments receive their funding from each town's Mayor and Council who represent their community.

Most, if not all, Mayors and fire commissioners work very closely with their respective fire department officers to discuss funding -- both short and long term.

Governing bodies should understand with apparatus maintenance programs, the life expectancy of major equipment (i.e., ladder, pumper and rescue trucks) runs 20+ years.

Phillips stressed, "It is very important that the mutual aid towns keep up with their equipment replacements.

He said, "However, should a town opt out of buying replacement apparatus, such as a ladder truck, then assume they could then call another town for a ladder truck... eventually the mutual aid system would break down.

Mutual aid is just that. We work together fair and square. I'll cover you and you cover me. Not, you cover me because I don't want to spend the money.

Mutual aid is the shared service concept in action. Working together the mutual aid system can augment any town during their time of need.

United we stand, divided we fail, and public safety is at risk."

SBFCA History

This integrated mutual aid support just didn't happen.

Back in 1933, when times were still rough, the County was struggling back from the Great Depression.

Fire service was no exception. Fire fighting equipment was hard to come by. Many fire companies and departments owned their own equipment and firehouse. When they couldn't meet their payments, they turned to their towns to pick them up. Back then, certain towns lacked equipment or manpower. Assistance had to be found to safely protect their residents.

Town fire chiefs and ex-fire chiefs thought if all the resources were put together, and proper planning and training was established, no area would be left unprotected in the South Bergen County area.

This blossomed into one of the strongest and largest mutual aid organizations in New Jersey.

The first point of order was to have action plans in place in the event of a major fire or disaster -- or if a town was short on manpower or its equipment was out of service.

It was decided to establish zones, with a group in each area for initial response. An organization was formed with SBFCA officers elected and operational zone coordinators assigned. More towns joined SBFCA, further strengthening it.

Through WWII, the Chiefs met regularly and importantly so, since many towns were shorthanded due to department members serving in the armed forces. Mutual aid plans were used on many occasions.

Through the years, changes were made to include Task Force and Strike Teams formed, F.A.S.T. Team procedures and other plans updated, etc.

Active Fire Chiefs meet every two months to discuss firematic situations and look for ways to improve skill levels with insights based on experience. With so many major fires in the South Bergen area, they have honed their skills.

Chief Coordinator Ron Phillips concluded, "75 years is a long, long time and the South Bergen Fire Chiefs Association proudly continues, carrying on the great traditions of fire fighting: the protection of life and property of all our citizens."

Additional sources include *South Bergen Fire Chiefs 75th Journal. ###*

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