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was looking out my window and I saw that thing blow up. I saw the debris go everywhere. We started smelling gas at about 12:15 (p.m.)."

— Michael Thomas, employee at McReps Inc.

"We felt the explosion. I knew it could not be an earthquake, but for a moment no one knew what had happened. We all came outside and all you could see was black smoke and flames ... It looks like nothing is left."

— Jane Marx, employee at Stapleton Realty

Blast destroys Oconomowoc church



7 injured in blast at 95-year-old First Baptist

By JUSTIN KERN and JEFF RUMAGE

Freeman Staff

OCONOMOWOC – A fiery blast destroyed all but the bell tower of a 95-year-old church in downtown Oconomowoc on Wednesday afternoon, injuring seven people and scorching an adjacent house.

First Baptist Church, 301 W. Wisconsin Ave., and a house at 20 S. Worthington St. were leveled by the explosion at 1:26 p.m., seven minutes after police were notified about a strong odor of natural gas in the area, said Bob Duffy, Oconomowoc director of economic development, during a news conference Wednesday afternoon.

At least seven were injured, including five construction workers and two firefighters, Duffy said. One victim was taken by Flight For Life to Froedtert Hospital in Wauwatosa. Information on their condition was not available Wednesday night.

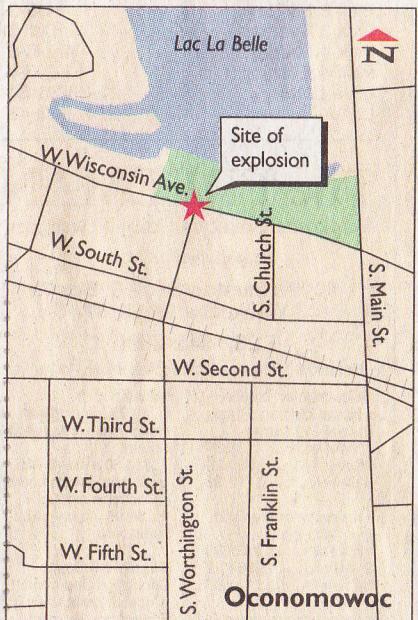
Four victims, three men and one woman, were taken to Oconomowoc Memorial Hospital for treatment of bruises and abrasions, a hospital spokesperson said. Those four people were released within five hours.

Inside

■ With resolve, First Baptist members watch as historic church burns. **PAGE 4A**

■ Aid ready for displaced families, emergency workers. **PAGE 4A**

For video coverage of the event see www.gmtoday.com.



First Baptist Church and a neighboring house exploded around 1:30 p.m. Wednesday in Oconomowoc. A city official said late Wednesday afternoon which sent black clouds of smoke several hundred feet into the air, is still under investigation.

"It (the blast) knocked all the stuff off our walls."

— Jose Meloro, resident, 310 W. South St.

"I thought my furnace had exploded."

— Deana Binkelman, resident, 344 W. South St.



The force from the combusting church was enough to shatter windows at the Oconomowoc Community Center across the street at 324 W. Wisconsin Ave. and scraps of brick, wood and household items orbited the epicenter. Houses on nearby streets were evacuated as emergency crews worked to cut off the gas supply and tend to the injured.

Firefighters extinguished the blaze from the blast after about four hours.

Four doors down from the church, Jeremy Sebero was smoking a cigarette on his porch, when he heard the explosion.

"The blast was so large, it literally hurt my chest," Sebero said. "Then there was shrapnel. Everything just flying, flying everywhere."

Investigation includes gas calls, smells

The incident remains under investigation. Duffy said the city is also checking its possible relation to an \$8.5 million, 8-month road construction project underway in the area that had Wisconsin Avenue at the church closed to through traffic.

A call of a gas leak near the church came in to We Energies at about 12:30 p.m. Wednesday from a contractor on the scene, said company spokesman Rick James. James said his company is not sure if the gas leak is related to the explosion at the church

See **BLAST**, Page 4A



Jeff Rumble/Freeman Staff

A few photo albums are all that remain Wednesday for Tom Lemieux, who lived at 20 S. Worthington St., Oconomowoc. Lemieux said he was returning from the post office when he heard an explosion that destroyed the house he was renting.



In this photo taken July 1, 2013, a bicyclist rides past the First United Methodist Church in Oconomowoc past emergency crews and drivers. The near-miss occurred Wednesday in an explosion.

less than an hour later, though he said We Energies will work with fire investigators to find a cause.

"A gas line was struck by a contractor that was working in the area and it was the contractor who called us," James said.

James said they received reports of a hissing sound and a smell. A company crew arrived at the scene at 12:39 p.m. and turned off the flow of gas, he said.

Department of Transportation spokesman Dennis Shook said that contracted work on the project was being performed by Dorner Inc. in the area of the church at some point Wednesday, though he was unsure if it had any connection with the natural gas leak and call that preceded the church blast.

"Frankly, there is still a lot of stuff that's not known here," Shook said.

Wisconsin Avenue remains at a full closure until further notice from the DOT, Shook said. Shook said more information may be released today, and that his organization extends its thoughts to those injured and affected by the incident.

'It's pretty much torched up'

Tom Lemieux had just moved in to one of the homes damaged in the explosion. He was on his way home from the post office Wednesday afternoon when he saw plumes of smoke from the direction of his new rental home.

Everything familiar to him was about to go up in flames.

"All I could salvage were some picture albums. I ran in when the whole bottom level was on fire, I couldn't get upstairs," Lemieux said. "I tried to get whatever I could. It's pretty much torched up."

Michael Thomas, an employee at nearby McReps Inc., 225 W. Wisconsin Ave., said he smelled natural gas at about 12:15 p.m., more than an hour before the explosion. Parker's Place Fitness Center owner Kevin Ellis was running by the church when he, too, smelled the gas. Ellis said the odor got stronger as he approached the church, leading him to attempt to alert workers at the front of the church.

"I said to the guys, 'I smell gas.' They said it wasn't anything to worry about," Ellis said. "Right before I got to the corner — no more than 60 meters away — it exploded. It was a bad scene."

Crews respond, gas out

In response to the high-level disaster call, Mayor Maury Sullivan said the city implemented its emergency command system, which promotes open communication of verified facts between city command officers, and city police and the fire departments.

Road construction on the site forced emergency crews to come from various directions. Once poised, ladder trucks stood over the church and nearby buildings to shoot water at the smoky mess.

Mutual aid calls came in from fire crews in Delafield, Stone Bank and Ixonia, among others.

From the explosion, about 180 customers in the area were without gas from the time of the call in the afternoon until at least 8 p.m. Wednesday, James said. He added that the Oconomowoc Fire Department would decide when that gas line would be turned back on. We Energies workers are willing to go door to door to relight pilot lights at area homes and businesses, though some buildings might be without service until today, James said.

(Freeman reporters Rasmieyh Abdelnabi, Emily Bultman and John Morton contributed to this report.)

(Justin Kern can be reached at jkern@conleynet.com; Jeff Rumage can be reached at jrumage@conleynet.com)



Kevin Harnack/Freeman Staff

Three firefighters work to spray water on the remains of First Baptist Church, 301 W. Wisconsin Ave., and a house located at 20 S. Worthington St. on Wednesday.



Kevin Harnack/Freeman Staff

Wisconsin Ave. A house at 20 S. Worthington St. was also leveled by the church explosion.



Jeff Rumage/Freeman Staff

Rose Radke looks beyond her husband, Carroll, and an Oconomowoc police officer at a fire that destroyed First Baptist Church on Wednesday afternoon. The Radkes were married at the church in 1986 and both served on the church council.

Aid ready for displaced families, emergency workers

OCONOMOWOC — Park Lawn Elementary School became a disaster shelter Wednesday afternoon for residents displaced by an explosion at First Baptist Church on Wisconsin Avenue in Oconomowoc.

The blast threw debris, ruptured windows and caused fires at other nearby homes, and emergency crews were forced to evacuate numerous homes during rescue and clean up efforts that lasted into the night.

Although the exact number of people was not known Wednesday evening, an American Red Cross disaster team was on the

scene to give shelter, food and water to the displaced.

Red Cross disaster supervisor Jerry Klingbeil responded with six other volunteers to Park Lawn Elementary School soon after the church exploded, and the organization is in the process of giving families information on adjusting from shock and getting their lives back together. The St. Vincent de Paul Society and Culver's Restaurants donated resources and food at the scene to families put out by the disaster and the workers at the scene.

- Freeman Staff