

Philadelphia inspector involved in building collapse commits suicide

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On Wednesday night the body of Philadelphia Department of Licenses and Inspections building inspector Ronald Wagenhoffer was discovered by police in his truck with a gunshot wound to the chest. Wagenhoffer had been the chief inspector for the building that collapsed last week on Market Street, a major thoroughfare in the city of Philadelphia, which killed six people and injured over a dozen more, as the four-story structure came crashing down on shoppers in a nearby thrift store. The death has been ruled a suicide.

Wagenhoffer had been involved in the building's demolition process, being the chief inspector for the property and visiting the site as recently as May 14 in response to a complaint just weeks before the fatal collapse occurred. Though investigations are still ongoing relating to the circumstances of the inspector's death, the suicide raises questions about the relationship of the city government with the building's private contractors.

"We're a city in deep and profound mourning," stated Everett Gillison, the head of the Department of Licenses and Inspections, to assembled news reporters. In regard to the wave of lawsuits and inquiries that have been leveled at the city in the wake of the tragedy, Gillison stated that "the department did what it was supposed to do under the code as it existed at the time," relaying that "this is a criminal investigation, which means criminal behavior is alleged and it was not on Mr. Wagenhoffer."

It has since been revealed that on the day of the collapse demolition crews had been operating heavy excavating machinery around the structure, which had not been permitted by regulators. Attempting to shirk blame for this, Kenneth Edelin, attorney for contracting firm Griffin Campbell, resorted to asserting that the firm's management simply "didn't see" the equipment

being used, although the contractor in charge had been on site at the time of the incident speaking to the building's owner.

Neither the state of Pennsylvania nor the city of Philadelphia requires their demolitionists to undergo certification or display any type of competence prior to being hired for a job. It has been subsequently revealed that the owner of the building, Richard Basciano, had hired the contractors for a mere \$10,000 while experts have estimated the job would cost much more. Under these circumstances, acting "under the code" would not have prevented the building's collapse.

Attorney Edelin has stated that numerous government agencies had visited the site in the proceeding weeks. "Obviously, the demolition was allowed to continue," he added, noting that Griffin Campbell had spoken to OSHA officials as recently as the day of the accident.

Numerous lawsuits have been launched by survivors of the collapse against the firm and the various other players involved. James Golkow, attorney for one of the survivors, has stated that in the days leading up to the collapse there had been numerous complaints of bricks falling onto the roof of the Salvation Army store that was subsequently crushed.

According to city code, a property inspector must give the go-ahead for a demolition permit before a building is demolished, returning to the premises once the procedure has been nearly completed. It has been shown that numerous complaints had been raised by nearby residents involving the practices of Griffin Campbell. Video taken of the building before its collapse shows crews hacking apart the building's edifice as bricks fall onto the street below. Similarly, the walls were not laterally braced, in violation of Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulations.

In the wake of the tragedy, officials have sought to pin the blame for the events entirely on Campbell's crane operator, Sean Benschop, who was found to have traces of marijuana in his bloodstream on the day of the building's collapse.

"Justice will only be served if Sean Benschop receives a sentence that buries him in a jailhouse forever, just like his victims were buried on Wednesday," stated Philadelphia Democratic Mayor Michael Nutter. Nutter has made similar statements in an attempt to minimize the event and its implications.

It has been revealed that Benschop, along with the Griffin Campbell firm, had done extensive work for the city of Philadelphia, including several other demolition jobs. Edelin cited that the firm's view of the employee had been "the same as the view held by the City of Philadelphia, who had hired Mr. Benschop to do any number of demolitions."

Various investigations by city attorneys and legislators launched into the actions leading to the disaster will act as a brake on any sincere inquiries into the facts of the incident, serving rather to cover up the roles of various officials involved in such corruption.

Similarly, proposals for new regulations coming from the mayor's office have refrained from demanding contractors receive any sort of certifications. Since the incident, city license and inspections officers have paid visits to over 300 construction sites, having to stop work at several due to numerous violations.



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