

# Natural gas explosion kills firefighter in Wisconsin

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A massive natural gas explosion erupted Tuesday evening in downtown Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, killing a volunteer firefighter and injuring 11 other people. Sun Prairie, with a growing population of over 29,000, is located approximately 10 miles from Madison, the state capital.

Residents had reported smelling natural gas throughout the downtown area after a 4-inch gas main was struck by a still unnamed contractor. WE Energies notified local police of the rupture and at approximately 6:30 p.m. local police ordered a mandatory five-block evacuation, forcing hundreds of people to flee the area.

At 7:05 p.m., a fireball erupted and continued to burn for several hours, destroying several buildings, including family homes and apartments.

Eyewitness accounts reported that the shock-wave was felt miles away. Car alarms blared and fires raged throughout the evening. The fireball shot upwards of 200 feet into the air, with plumes of smoke visible from a considerable distance.

As of Wednesday night, a quarantine zone was still in effect, with dozens of residents still unable to access their homes to assess the damage, or even see if they are still standing.

The five-block evacuation zone was expanded to a half-mile after the initial explosion, and more than 100 residents were displaced and forced to spend the evening at the local high school. Small explosions were reported throughout the night as trapped gas pockets ignited.

WE Energies officials reported that 12 gas mains had been shut off, resulting in over 500 people losing power.

Volunteer firefighter Captain Cory Barr was identified as the lone fatality. He is survived by his wife, Abby Barr, and their twin three-year-old

daughters. Abby stated that her husband rushed to the scene to assist in the evacuation effort.

One of the buildings leveled by the inferno, which had stood next to the gas main that was struck, The Barr House tavern, was owned by Cory and Abby.

More than 24 hours after the explosion occurred, no explanation had been given by any government official as to whether safety protocols had been followed, or what kind of work was being carried out.

WE Energies and local police have refused to name the company that was doing the digging or name the firm that hired the contractor. Governor Scott Walker toured the devastated area and gave a short speech, declaring his “love” for the volunteer fire department and pledging to “get to the bottom of what happened.”

Sun Prairie Police Lt. Kevin Konopacki stated in the same press conference that the police would not be releasing any information regarding an impending investigation. Konopacki alluded to the devastation and the ongoing danger as the reason for refusing to release information.

Some residents are being allowed to return to their homes, only to find that there is nothing left. Angela Levendoski, who lived in the apartments above a restaurant that was destroyed, was told the evacuation would only last a few hours.

Minutes after she was evacuated, the inferno engulfed her home. “I’m lost,” she told local reporters. “It’s not just the clothes on my back, it’s the memories.”

The working-class community of Sun Prairie has responded to the disaster with an outpouring of solidarity and support. Multiple GoFundMe pages have been established for affected families and thousands of messages across social media have praised the volunteer firefighters for saving hundreds of lives moments before the explosion.



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