

Gas explosion rips through apartment complex in Silver Spring, Maryland

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On Thursday morning at about 10:30 a.m. local time, a sudden explosion tore through an apartment complex, injuring over a dozen people in the Washington D.C. suburb of Silver Spring, Maryland.

The Friendly Garden Apartments development consists of six four-story buildings situated in a quiet neighborhood across the street from a local park. On March 3, it became the site of a massive fire, following what witnesses described as a loud “boom” that caused the ground nearby to shake.

The Montgomery County Fire Department said on Twitter that a call came in at 10:37 a.m. reporting a fire at on the first floor of one of the buildings. By the time firefighters arrived, the raging blaze had already taken hold on all four floors of one of the buildings.

Fire Chief Scott Goldstein said the incident injured 14 people, sending 10 of them to the hospital. About 225 people have been displaced by the incident, 35 of them due to the destruction of their units and the rest due to ‘short term’ and ‘long term’ displacement, Goldstein added. He said three of the complex’s six buildings are now “unsafe to reoccupy.”

One video of the incident posted to social media shows the complex from a high angle, capturing the height of the flames from the fire as they reach above the top of the building. In another video of the incident, captured from a nearby security camera, an entire wall of the building is blown out from the inside as if from a demolition, followed by black smoke rolling out of the structure.

Patricia Tyson, a witness who lives nearby, told *Bethesda Magazine*, “It felt like something almost fell on my house.” Tyson, who knows someone who lived at Friendly Gardens, said, “We started praying immediately for her. She takes care of a son who’s in a wheelchair.”

On Friday, Fire Chief Goldstein appeared before the press with an update on the incident, saying investigators had discovered a cut pipe in the basement of the building that blew up and caught fire. Working with the fire department in the investigation are Washington Gas and Pepco, the local utilities.

According to Goldstein, out of the calls made to emergency services from the apartment complex since January 1, 2021, “There were several medical calls, but no prior gas calls” or reports of the smell of gas in the area of the apartments.

Perhaps no 911 calls were placed, but some residents still claimed there was a gas smell the day of the explosion. One of the Friendly Gardens residents, TJ Hall, told NBC Washington, “When I left this morning [on Thursday], I told my grandma, ‘It smells like gas.’”

Goldstein said, “We are continuing to work to locate the source of ignition, and we are working multiple theories at this time and work on the evidence until there’s a conclusive point for the source of ignition.”

Earlier on Friday, Goldstein had said a maintenance worker was doing plumbing work in the basement before the incident happened, but investigators were working to determine if there was any connection between the maintenance and the cut gas pipe. “It is possible that the worker cut that gas pipe,” Goldstein speculated, “and that is a source that we’re working on in our theory.”

Another resident, Alex Jecrois, who lives in one of the Friendly Gardens buildings across from the one that exploded, told *Bethesda Magazine* a maintenance worker who was in his building that morning alerted Jecrois he had smelled what seemed like a gas leak just minutes earlier.

ResidentialOne, the property management company

that operates the complex, issued a statement on its website homepage saying all residents of Friendly Gardens had been accounted for but three remained hospitalized. According to Zoominfo, the firm is “a premiere property management company in the mid-Atlantic region” and claims to manage “close to 10,000 units.” Its cited revenue is over \$84 million.

Records with Montgomery County’s Department of Permitting Services show that the building at 2405 that exploded and caught fire was in the midst of ongoing inspections before Thursday’s incident occurred. The county records for fire permits at those buildings, including 2405, expired on September 5, 2019. Permits are given following inspections of sprinkler systems and fire alarms to make sure they work.

County Executive Marc Elrich, a Democrat who has held longstanding positions on the County Council before being elected chief executive in 2018, toured the damage Thursday and vowed to “do everything we can to get to the bottom of it and ultimately decide if there’s something we, as a county, as a regulatory body, need to do.”

Montgomery Housing Partnership, an area nonprofit, established collection efforts to support victims of the incident and help them find new homes. Elrich said the Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) of Montgomery County is “looking through their inventory of vacant units to help put people into permanent housing as soon as possible.” The HOC, which is funded by the county, and administers what was formerly known as Section 8 housing, owns and leases thousands of ostensibly affordable housing units across Montgomery County.

Tyson, the witness who said she worried about her neighbors at nearby Friendly Gardens, gave voice to some of the concerns for the displaced, saying, “This apartment complex was originally built for residents who were forced to move out of their homes due to urban renewal. This is a total shock and we’re sorry that something like this happened.”

The incident follows similar events in the region over the past decade. In 2016, a gas explosion four miles from Friendly Gardens at Flower Branch Apartments in Silver Spring left seven people dead and about 70 more displaced. In 2020, the Maryland Public Service Commission fined Washington Gas \$750,000 in connection to that explosion in the wake of an

investigation that pointed to broken mercury regulators as the cause of the incident.

An August 2020 explosion destroyed several row houses and resulted in the deaths of a 61-year-old and a 20-year-old college student in a northwest Baltimore neighborhood. The explosion was attributed to “a large natural gas buildup the day after a contractor worked on an HVAC system in one of the homes,” reported the *Baltimore Sun*.

The utility provider, Baltimore Gas and Electric (BGE), has reported nearly a doubling of gas leaks in its piping in the period since 2009.



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