

Cause of 2009 fire at Suburban House in Pikesville still unknown

Popular eatery reopened nearby; development plans for former site undetermined

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(Enlarge) The new Suburban House restaurant is located just down the street on Reisterstown Road in Pikesville from the original Suburban House that was decimated in a July 8, 2009 fire. The cause of the blaze that caused \$1 million in damages is still unknown. (Photo by Steve Schuster)

Nearly a year and a half after a 2-alarm blaze destroyed the Suburban House, fire investigators still don't know the cause or origin of the blaze that destroyed the Pikesville restaurant, causing nearly \$1 million in damages.

"The cause is undetermined — and will likely remain so," said Elise Armacost, a spokeswoman for the Baltimore County Fire Department.

County fire officials said they officially closed their investigation of the July 8, 2009, fire Jan. 4.

However, case records indicate that the investigation — which also included a federal agency, county police, insurance investigators and an electrical engineer — had been actually closed in 2009.

Armacost confirmed that date, saying a fire department official had "made an error" and that the investigation was closed in 2009.

ATF spokeswoman Clare Weber said in a phone message that ATF closed their investigation and deemed the cause of the fire also as undetermined, according to a voicemail message from Clare Weber an ATF spokeswoman.

According to the county investigation reports, the fire started in a food supply room and was discovered by an employee.

Following the blaze, both fire and police investigators interviewed restaurant employees, the restaurant's multiple owners and the building's landlord, according to Mark Horowitz, one of restaurant's owners, as well as county documents.

Investigation reports compiled by county officials indicate that investigators found "burn patterns" which indicated the fire burned from the top down (ceiling to floor). The report and Horowitz also said that the fire could have been caused by wiring in the ceiling.

But fire officials say there was nothing occupied or stored above the ceiling in that storeroom, other than the common space that the other building tenants shared.

County investigators also determined in 2009 that "extensive fire damage" prevented them from determining what actually caused the fire.

"With complete destruction of the wiring in this area (inside the former restaurant site), I was unable to

determine an exact point of origin," Baltimore County Police Investigator Charles Mast wrote in his report dated Sept. 4, 2009.

The original site of the restaurant — and the fire — at 911 Reisterstown Road is now a parking lot, and will likely stay that way, according to Baltimore County Revitalization Specialist Pierce Macgill.

The Suburban House reopened last July just down the street at 1700 Reisterstown Road.

Macgill said Pikesville will need the site for parking because it is located on the stretch of Reisterstown Road where a \$2.4 million revitalization project is planned. County Executive Kevin Kamenetz announced the revitalization plan only four days after taking office in December.

Construction is now under way at the southwest corner of Reisterstown Road and Sudbrook Lane for a 10,000-square-foot building, which will have retail space on the first floor and offices on the second floor.

Horowitz said that after the fire the "landlord was really procrastinating to rebuild."

But Mark Wagonheim, of Schwaber Management Co., which owns the property, said his hands were tied.

"We had to wait for the insurance issues to be settled before we could proceed," Wagonheim said.

And Dr. Jeffrey Gaber, of Pikesville, owner of Schwaber Management, said this week that the former restaurant space will not remain a parking lot.

"A real estate development company is marketing the site to see if any tenants locally and nationally would be interested in building on the site" or taking over the adjacent strip mall, Gaber said.

Horowitz said parking has always been an issue in the neighborhood.

"There has always been fighting amongst the store owners about the parking," Horowitz said.

Speculation on parking aside, according to Horowitz, being shut down for a year was really a big loss for their restaurant business.

"We were closed down for a year ... we were in business for 25 years and we have a tremendous following, but it took us a while to secure our new location," Horowitz said.

Horowitz said all of his previous staff with the exception of two or three people transferred to the new restaurant. It was a difficult process to rebuild, he said.

But now, "we are doing very well here, we have great parking and great visibility, it's a more modern building and we are doing very well," he said.

This story has been updated.



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