

Lowell fire victims' families granted emergency order to stop building demolition

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The family of several victims of the Branch Street fire in Lowell have filed an order to prevent demolition of the building. SUN/ David H. Brow (David H. Brow)

LOWELL - The families of the Branch Street fire victims, including those who died in the blaze last week, have obtained a temporary restraining order preventing the demolition of the fire-ravaged building.

The Sheff Law Offices of Boston obtained the order also for victims who survived the fire, an order granted the day after officials at the scene had told The Sun they expected the building to be taken down Tuesday.

Douglas Sheff, the senior partner of Sheff Law Offices, said the halt in demolition was sought "to preserve the rights of the victims and the families of those who tragically perished in the fire to find out what happened and to get the truth."

"We have had many reports of non-functioning smoke detectors and electrical fires that occurred before this tragic fire," Sheff told The Sun Monday evening. "How can we knock the building down without finding out what happened?"

"How we can tell these families we never found out what the root cause of the fire was?"

Sheff said his clients have told him both about a previous electrical fire in the residential units, as well as an electrical fire on the first floor of the liquor store.

The Sun has reported that there was a one-alarm electrical fire in the liquor store last summer. A faulty neon sign on the first floor caught fire and power was shut off to that circuit, according to the Fire Department.

Officials have not publicly stated what they believed caused the fire at 77-85 Branch St.

Sources have told The Sun that investigators have ruled out fireworks as the cause of the fire and are examining other potential accidental causes, including electrical causes.

A source told The Sun a press conference with updates on the investigation would be held Tuesday at 3:30 p.m. by the Branch Street fire station.

A full hearing on the victims' request for a longer halt to the demolition of the building is scheduled for Thursday at Middlesex Superior Court in Woburn.

Sheff said the victims deserve the right to have their own investigators probe the fire-damaged building. Sheff expressed hope that his clients could share information that any investigation they have conducted uncovers with the state and vice versa.

Asked if his firm would represent the clients for other legal claims, Sheff said: "The first step is to investigate. If we find there are things that occurred or did not occur that were wrong and led to these tragedies, of course we will represent them in any manner appropriate in response."

On Tuesday afternoon, a city official told The Sun there was no schedule for the demolition of the three-story structure.

Last Thursday's fire killed seven people.

Among the dead were: Torn Sak, Ellen Vuong, and three of their five children, Sayuri Sak, 7, Anthony Sak, 12, and Ryan Sak, 9.

Also killed were Tina Christakos and Robert Downs.

Sun reporter Lisa Redmond contributed to this report.