

Damages reach \$35 million in '01 Bridgeport fire

The Bridgeport business blaze led to a class-action suit. The last of 16 defendants agreed to settle for \$1 million.

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By Derrick Nunnally
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A protracted court fight over the massive 2001 fire in Bridgeport ended this week with a \$1 million agreement, setting total damages at \$35 million.

Five hours into jury deliberations after a five-week class-action trial, lawyers for the plaintiffs and a Souderton electrical contractor agreed to settle the lone outstanding claim in the biggest fire in Montgomery County history.

The lawsuit over the Continental Business Center fire, which destroyed 15 businesses and the century-old former textile mill that housed them, had tied up a Montgomery County courtroom since Feb. 5.

Fifteen of the 16 defendants paid off their liabilities for a combined \$34 million before the trial, but Universal Electrical Services Co. took the case to trial rather than agree to the plaintiffs' \$6 million settlement request.

After a jury note said no consensus would soon come, the two sides agreed on the \$1 million.

Lawyers on each side claimed victory.

"When we took the case to trial, our expert on the damages testified that they were between \$30 million and \$41 million," said [Shanin Specter](#), an attorney for the more than 100 plaintiffs. "\$35 million is a good figure."

In addition to the electrical contractor, the defendants included insurance companies; some tenants of the building, who investigators said had improperly stored combustible materials; and the building's owner.

The May 15, 2001, fire was caused by a water-damaged electrical circuit-breaker panel, authorities said. The blaze, fought by about 500 firefighters, burned through the night.

The destruction of the businesses cost 103 jobs, and nearly seven years later, much of the site remains a barren concrete slab where truck trailers are parked in a long row.

The largest single-party payout in the suit was \$9 million by Continental Business Center owner Charles Bushar III.

Universal Electrical Services took the case to trial even though the 54-employee company could have been held liable for the blaze's entire damages.

"Believe me, there was a lot of pressure on us to settle," said Tony Sherr, the company's attorney.

He claimed a win after the plaintiffs accepted the \$1 million, which had been offered before the trial.

"My client is overjoyed," Sherr said, "because his company was on the line, as you can well imagine, if he had a \$41 million judgment against him."

The settlement came, he said, after jurors sent out a note Wednesday saying they couldn't reach a consensus on the question of Universal Electrical's liability. Montgomery County Judge Steven T. O'Neill answered the note with an order to keep deliberating, but the lawyers made a deal soon after.

"It comes late, obviously," Specter said, "but it takes a while for the justice system to work."

The settlement is not official until O'Neill approves it. A hearing is planned for June.