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## Crews dig for clues in Ewing gas explosion

By Alex Zdan/The Times

Yesterday, workers, investigators and insurance representatives descended on the scene of a March 4 gas explosion that killed a township woman, digging up the ground and analyzing the area for any clues on where fault in the fatal blast lies.

Linda Cerritelli, a 62-year-old Crockett Lane resident who was working from home that day, was killed in the 12:51 p.m. explosion that decimated her condo and one next door. A total of 55 homes were damaged or destroyed in the blast, which injured seven utility workers.

Cerritelli's autopsy report, released this week, showed she suffered significant trauma in the blast and fire but said the exact cause and manner of her death remain under investigation. The amount of time that passed between Cerritelli's injury and her death is unknown, according to the report.

Though PSE&G had sent workers out to mark the gas lines before contractor Henkels & McCoy began electrical work in the unit next to Cerritelli, the accuracy of those markouts apparently remains in dispute.

"I think different people would have different opinions on that," said Raymond E. Mack, an attorney hired by the insurance carrier for the development's condominium association.

PSE&G had told Ewing Mayor Bert Steinmann that the markings had been placed with acceptable accuracy. The Henkels & McCoy crew believed they struck a gas main inadvertently more than an hour before the explosion, officials said.

They immediately called PSE&G, which sent workers who were on scene for about 45 minutes until the blast tore through the complex.

Ewing police confirmed this week that neither the Henkels & McCoy crew nor PSE&G had called 911 when they believed they had a gas leak. Police and firefighters in the township first found out about the gas leak when the explosion happened.

"I think somebody should have called 911," Steinmann said on Monday. "And I think it should have happened before, not after the fact."

At the site of the explosion yesterday, one of the most noticeable pieces of equipment was being re-

placed with others as the investigation continued to take shape.

A vertical driller, which was charred and had a partially-melted seat but otherwise was little damaged in the explosion, was able to be driven onto a flatbed truck and taken away.

An orange "evidence" sticker was on it, placed by a private company that Mack said would be housing materials from the explosion under lock and key.

Two backhoes had taken center stage, leaving a 5-foot-deep hole above the main and churning up dirt across the area between condos. Workers used surveying equipment to take readings.

Mack watched as one of the backhoes dug up the ground above the 2 inch gas main that had fed the blast and 15 foot high flames.

"There's various things these experts have to do to determine the cause and origin of the explosion," Mack said.

Vehicles with state of New Jersey government plates were also at the scene, and Mack said the Board of Public Utilities (BPU) had investigators there. Typically, the Occupational Health and Safety Administration will issue a report six months after an incident like the

explosion, followed closely by one from the BPU, which will detail what the public agencies know about the blast.

Both PSE&G and Henkels & McCoy had their own insurance representatives on site along with Mack, who is from the Blue Bell, Pa., firm Nelson Levin deLuca and Hamilton. The firm represents Mercer Insurance Co., the condo association's insurance carrier.

No estimate on the cost of the damage in the area has yet been made, Mack said.

Burns on Cerritelli's body were extensive, and she had to be identified using dental records, according to the autopsy report.

Cerritelli's son could not be reached for comment yesterday. Mack said the Cerritelli estate had hired the Philadelphia law firm of Kline & Specter, which had people on scene earlier yesterday.

Attorney Tom Kline could not be reached for comment yesterday, but according to his firm's website he was "named to the National Law Journal's 'Winning Hall of Fame' as one of fewer than 100 lawyers selected for compiling 'significant bench or jury trial verdicts and who has a record of success over many years.'"

The website also quotes a city newspaper's editorial board as calling Kline a "high-powered plaintiffs' attorney ... who has won a number of eight-figure awards for clients injured or killed due to negligence or incompetence by businesses, government agencies, and nonprofit health-care providers."

In 2004, Kline won a \$40.5 million settlement for the families of six people who died in a Hatboro,

Pa., apartment fire after a flood dislodged a gas pipe and led to an explosion.