

Richard Rosen Defends Client in Tragic Fire Case

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FROM WIRE REPORTS

CHARLESTON — The Charleston mayor is blaming the owner of a furniture store for the deaths of nine city firefighters, saying illegal additions to the building turned a small trash fire into a raging inferno.

Mayor Joe Riley's comments to the Post and Courier of Charleston came after an analysis released earlier this month by fire experts found firefighters did not follow standard safety practices and had obsolete equipment when battling the Sofa Super Store blaze June 18, the nation's worst loss of firefighters since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

An attorney for the Sofa Super Store owner Herb Goldstein said the mayor's comments were "not reality." The city's fire and code inspectors never pointed out any potential hazards or violations at the building, attorney Richard Rosen said.

"To blame Herb Goldstein for something nobody saw for over 10 years is not reality," Rosen told the newspaper. "I think it's silly to say that the code violations killed firefighters. I don't think I need to address Joe Riley's motivations. He's a politician."

Riley told the newspaper in an interview that he thinks the additions to the store compromised the building's fire protection. The mayor has avoided criticizing Fire Chief Rusty Thomas, who announced he would retire before the report was released.

"I will not say the chief let us down," Riley said. "He worked hard and did the best he could."

The head of the panel that put together the report said a fire like the furniture store blaze happens about once a week in the U.S.

"Unfortunately, Chief Thomas was out of touch with the mainstream of what was going on in the fire service for the last 30 years or so," Gordon Routley said. "It was hard for me to understand how he was unaware of a lot of this or discounted this."

While the mayor will hire the next fire chief, some Charleston City Council members say they want to be more involved.

"I don't want to sift through 400 résumés, but I want to see the final three before City Council," Councilman Gary White said.

Riley has hired a search firm to help him find a replacement for Thomas. He said he plans to

have that firm meet with the City Council. Riley also said if he has several closely matched finalists for the position, he may ask council members for recommendations.