Sofa Super Store – Investigators seize more fire evidence

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Investigators seize more fire evidence
Items linked to possible code violations

By Schuyler Kropf , Glenn Smith
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Investigators armed with a search warrant returned to the ruins of the Sofa Super Store on Tuesday to seize new evidence related to the June 18 fire that killed nine Charleston firefighters.

Charleston police and State Law Enforcement Division arson agents sought chains, padlocks and other items at the Savannah Highway site.

The items are linked to possible fire and building code violations discovered in the aftermath of the blaze.

The search was prompted in part by observations made by Edye Graves, a city of Charleston deputy building official, who reported finding exit doors locked with chains and padlocks.

Additionally, an affidavit accompanying the warrant says Graves found three of the building's seven overhead fire doors did not function properly, "as they failed to close during the fire."

It is not clear to what extent, if any, the violations contributed to the spread of the fire or the loss of life.

Charleston police have been investigating the fire with SLED, the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and the Charleston County Sheriff's Office.

Sources familiar with the probe say investigators are looking hard at the possibility that a discarded cigarette sparked the fire near a loading dock area where employees often took cigarette breaks.

Investigators on the scene Tuesday declined to comment after their two-hour visit. But their warrant indicates four padlocks, a can of varnish and 24 fusible links from fire doors were taken.

Fusible links are devices that automatically trigger the closing of a fire door during a fire. The links are like small pins that burn through when they reach a certain temperature, allowing a door to close.

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Jay Lowry, a former Charleston firefighter and fire inspector, said fire doors can serve a vital role in slowing the spread of fire. Keeping exit doors clear also is key because they provide

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people with a way in and out of a building during emergencies, he said.

Lowry said some businesses padlock exit doors to prevent theft but that the practice poses a serious danger.

“It’s one of the worst things you can do in a building,” he said. “Obviously, it’s important to the fire department because if you become trapped or lost you want to be able to get out a door. … Any businesses out there with locks on their exit doors, I’ll tell you, they’re setting themselves up for a bad, bad time.”

Jonathan Tyrrell III, the store employee who was rescued from the burning building, said Tuesday that locked or malfunctioning doors were not a factor in his ordeal.

“I got out of the repair shop, and inside the hallway there was a roll-top door. It was down and it was on fire, so I went back into the repair room.”

He said the burning door that blocked his escape led to a smaller hallway where a regular sized door opened into the store’s showroom.

He said he knew of at least one large door that was locked with a chain and padlock.

“That was the door that went to the dock area. They had it rigged to where the chain looped through the door.”

Richard Rosen, an attorney for Sofa Super Store owner Herb Goldstein, said the door locks were used for after-hour security.

He also said the business has cooperated fully with every investigation and visit to the site, which has not been disturbed and remains secure at the owner’s expense.

The city had previously determined that the fire started in a section of the building that was built without the proper permits. The city is investigating to see whether that contributed to the severity of the blaze.

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