

FORTY-YEAR-OLD BUILDING: 'VERY FEW' SMOKE ALARMS, NO SPRINKLERS

Fire that killed three seniors ruled accidental

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VANCOUVER — Arson has been ruled out as the cause of a fire that killed three women in a North Vancouver apartment building Tuesday night.

Police initially labelled the fire suspicious, but Fire Chief Barrie Penman said it was not set deliberately.

"We look for accelerants, look for signs around the building that it might have been set. There is no indication of that," he said.

Two of the fire's victims, 78-year-old Rita Phillips and 80-year-old Annette Meester, were found in the building's lobby, just steps away from safety. Autopsies revealed both died of smoke inhalation, Constable Michael McLaughlin said.

Print Edition - Section Front



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An autopsy is still under way for 84-year-old Ilse Wilhelmine Dragossy, whom firefighters found on the third floor near her suite.

The fire department suspects the blaze began in the living room of Ms. Phillips's first-floor suite on the building's southwest corner.

Investigators have not ruled out electrical appliances and smoking materials. But they say oxygen or propane tanks were not the cause.

"There is no oxygen tank in this suite," Constable McLaughlin said. "There was a propane tank on the second floor that contributed to the speed of the fire, but was not causal." The propane tank also caused the explosion many residents and neighbours heard.

Residents were to be allowed into the building today in 20-minute intervals, supervised by firefighters, to reclaim belongings. The building can be rebuilt but will be uninhabitable for a year, Constable McLaughlin said.

The three-storey walkup, of a type common in North Vancouver, had "very few" smoke alarms and no sprinklers, Chief Penman said. The building needed to comply only with fire safety codes from 1967, when it was built.

Chief Penman said there is no need to require owners to bring old buildings up to par.

"It would be a tall task ... to have everybody upgrade as the rules change. It's not that all these buildings are unsafe; they just might not be as safe as the new ones."

North Vancouver Mayor Darrell Mussatto said retrofitting all old buildings would be prohibitively expensive unless the provincial and federal governments pitched in.

But Marc Kaiser, whose North Vancouver apartment building caught fire several months ago from a cigarette left on a mattress, thinks that is a poor excuse.

"I think they should get all the old buildings up to code," he said. "What are three lives worth? That's typical; whenever you want to change something, that's the first thing they jump on: How much is it going to cost?"

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