

Area News

Tangle of lawsuits erupts after blast closed mall

Three people injured in 2001 explosion

By Kevin McCallum
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STAMFORD — The explosion that knocked out power to the Stamford Town Center mall last year sparked a web of lawsuits and countersuits not likely to be untangled soon.

The April 9, 2001, explosion injured three people and shut down the 130-store mall for four days shortly before the Easter holiday, one of the busiest shopping times of the year.

A contractor was upgrading electrical equipment in a room in the mall garage when the blast occurred, sending thick smoke through the garage

and forcing the mall to be evacuated.

The first person to file suit was the Town Center's mechanical supervisor, Michael Chambers of Stamford.

On Nov. 14, Chambers sued Gunzy Electrical, the Norwalk contractor performing the upgrades, for burns he suffered in the blast.

According to the complaint, filed in state Superior Court in Stamford, Chambers and the owner of the contracting firm, Scott Gunzy, went to the "switch gear room" on the second-floor garage to discuss the upgrades.

When they arrived, Gunzy's employee, Thomas Pond, was in the room, which contained one 400-amp and two 200-amp switch boxes, according to the suit.

As he explained the work that had to be done, Pond pointed to one of the boxes with a screwdriver in his hand,

according to the suit.

"While pointing the screwdriver in and near the electrical cabinet in the switch gear room, defendant Thomas Pond touched the tip of the screwdriver to a live electrical buss bar inside the cabinet, causing a massive electrical arc . . . resulting in a sudden and unexpected severe electrical explosion of fire," the suit states.

Chambers spent 10 days at the Westchester County Medical Center in New York recovering from third-degree burns to his hand, face and neck. Skin from his thigh had to be grafted into his hand, the suit states. He was 31 years old at the time of the accident.

Chambers' attorney, Paul Slager of the Stamford firm Silver, Golub & Teitell, said his client was lucky. Just before the explosion, Chambers turned his face away from the cabinet

to answer his cellular telephone, Slager said.

"It could have been a lot worse," Slager said.

The suit seeks unspecified damages for pain and suffering on the basis that the explosion was a result of Gunzy's failure to properly train and supervise Pond.

In response to Chambers' suit, Gunzy Electrical is suing the owners of the mall, Rich-Taubman Associates of Bloomfield Hills, Mich., for its role in the explosion.

The explosion would not have occurred if the mall had properly grounded the electrical equipment in the gear room, according to a suit filed by Hartford attorney Joel Rottner.

Rich-Taubman Associates, in turn, filed a countersuit last month against Gunzy Electrical, saying it was the contractor's responsibility to exercise proper safety precautions.

The wrangling over who is responsible for the blast hints at the numerous suits expected from insurance companies representing merchants who lost revenue during the closure, Slager said.

One store has done so, according to court records.

On July 23, Hartford Insurance Group sued Gunzy Electrical to recover the \$7,052 claim it paid to Cohen's Fashion Optical for lost income.

Gunzy Electrical's insurance company has received claims from numerous other stores as well, Slager said in court documents.

Attorneys for Gunzy Electrical could not be reached for comment. Attorneys for Rich-Taubman Associates declined to comment.