

The Columbus Dispatch

Ohio's Greatest Online Newspaper

'I THOUGHT IT WAS A BOMB'

4 firefighters, 4 patrons hurt when firetruck on run loses control, slams into Clintonville bar

Published: Tuesday, July 16, 2002

NEWS 01A

By Jill Riepenhoff, Matthew Marx and Dean Narciso

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

As investigators dissect the *crash* of a firetruck yesterday that injured eight people -- four Columbus firefighters and four others inside a Clintonville bar -- the key issue will be the vehicle's speed.

"That's going to be the question of the day," Columbus police investigator David Cornute said.

The *ladder* truck went out of control as it headed west on Arcadia Avenue and turned south onto N. High Street. It rolled onto its side in the intersection, then slid into Patrick J's Bar & Grille, 2711 N. High St., upside down.

The cab of the 70-ton truck barged through the north wall of the bar, sending tables, chairs, cinder blocks, liquor bottles and patrons flying.

"It sounded like a dam burst," said John Logue, 52, who was eating a Greek salad inside. "All this glass and concrete came flying at me. I had no idea what it was. Then I got knocked down. There was a lot of hysteria."

Daniel Toki, 19, was one of about 20 people inside the building. He was playing video games with his brother.

"I heard the sirens and then a big smash," Toki said. "I thought it was a bomb."

His brother, Travis, 22, had deep cuts on his arms and back and went to an urgent-care facility for treatment.

A relative, Dorothy Toki, 42, was sitting near the front of the building and also was injured. She was in stable condition at Ohio State University Medical Center last night.

Cecil Beasley was in the restroom when the building shook. He thought the roof was caving in.

"That's as close to hell as I've ever been," Beasley, 50, said.

Among those taken to hospitals were the four crew members on the truck: Lt. Rick Conti and firefighters Andy Trott, John Vacheresse and Dennis Hammond.

Trott, 30, a seven-year veteran, was driving the truck. Hammond, 35, a three-year employee, was serving as the tillerman -- the person who drives the rear of the vehicle. Hammond was in serious condition at Riverside Methodist Hospitals last night.

Conti, 41, was in fair condition at OSU Medical Center with a broken leg. Trott and Vacheresse, 36, were treated at Riverside and released.

A bar patron -- an unidentified woman -- was in poor condition at Riverside and bartender Charles "Adam" Breakiron, 28, was treated for cuts that he suffered when liquor bottles shattered around him. He was in stable condition at Riverside.

The crew of *Ladder* 13 was responding to a 5:45 p.m. fire alarm at 209 W. 18th Ave. on campus when it slammed into the bar three minutes after leaving the fire station on Arcadia Avenue.

The truck was a reserve vehicle, put into service yesterday so that *Ladder* 13 could undergo routine maintenance, Battalion Chief Mark Devine said.

Crew members inspected it and went for a test drive, Devine said.

Some witnesses said it appeared that the truck was traveling too fast to make the 90-degree turn off the steep Arcadia hill. Others said the truck was swerving to avoid a car that had ignored the truck's siren.

Devine said the firefighters on the truck are veterans.

"The guy who was driving probably has taken this hill 500 times," he said. "They take this hill 10 times a day."

A fire lieutenant familiar with the intersection said it's a dangerous one.

The turn onto High Street from Arcadia Avenue should be taken at speeds of no more than 20 mph, he said.

"You're coming down the hill and you've got nowhere to go," said the lieutenant who asked not to be named.

Witnesses said they saw Hammond crawl from the back of the flipped truck and drag himself several yards to the White Castle drive-through lane.

"His mouth and face were bloodied. He told people then to go see if everyone inside was OK," said Chris Gonzalez, 14, who saw the *crash* from across the street.

Late last night, hundreds of people gathered in the parking lots of the nearby White Castle and KFC restaurants to watch as heavy-duty tow trucks pulled out the firetruck.

There was concern that when the truck was taken out, Patrick J's would collapse, but it remained standing early this morning.

Patrick J's owner, Jon Raphael, rushed to the bar immediately after the accident and quickly

assessed damage.

"We're really fortunate," he said of the injuries. "We can replace everything else."

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Illustration: Photo, Graphic with Map appeared in newspaper, not in the archive.

Photo caption: (1) JAMES D. DECAMP | DISPATCH PHOTOS

A 70-ton *ladder* truck protrudes from the north wall of Patrick J's Bar & Grille, which it hit after failing to make a turn onto N. High Street.

(2) Rescue workers tend to an injured person outside Patrick J's Bar & Grille. Four Columbus firefighters and four people inside the Clintonville bar were injured.

(3) JAMES D. DECAMP | DISPATCH

Skid marks stretch about 50 yards along Arcadia Avenue just east of N. High Street, where a *ladder* truck lost control yesterday.

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The Columbus Dispatch

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WRECK COULD HAVE BEEN FAR WORSE

Published: Wednesday, July 17, 2002

NEWS 02A

By Mary C. Bridgman

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Patrick J's Bar & Grille patrons and employees started counting their blessings seconds after a firetruck slammed into the Clintonville tavern Monday night.

"It's really amazing I wasn't injured worse," Rae Laufenburger said yesterday from her room in Riverside Methodist Hospitals. "I was very lucky."

"This happened at the best time possible," said Craig Rundio, general manager of the popular hangout at 2711 N. High St. "Ten minutes either way and it would have been a different story."

When the firetruck slammed into the building just after 5:45 p.m., happy hour was over, the dinner crowd hadn't yet arrived, and the Monday night softball teams that the bar sponsors had late games.

"There could have been 50 people in here," said Jon Raphael, owner of the 15-year-old establishment. Instead, there were about 20.

Also, the 35-ton *ladder* truck missed a gas meter by 3 inches, crashed between utility poles, and missed all cars as it careened out of control along Arcadia Avenue and across N. High.

Laufenburger, 34, was seated at a window table at Patrick J's when she heard the wailing siren. She looked south and saw no fire engine. Then she looked north.

"It was upside-down, coming right at me," Laufenburger said.

In a split second, she was halfway across the dining room, on the floor, her lower body trapped under cinder blocks and wooden beams. Her head was bleeding profusely.

"People were yelling at me, 'We have to get out,' " she said.

"I guess they thought fuel was leaking from the engine. I said to them, 'I can't, I can't.' "

Amid heavy dust, employees removed the debris and helped Laufenburger to her feet. She walked several steps, then a nurse handed her a clean towel from the bar and told her to apply

pressure to the cuts. Laufenburger was unsure whether the nurse was a restaurant patron or a passer-by.

"I remember everything," she said. "The head injury looks the worst but is superficial. I clipped a table flying across the room."

Laufenburger, a Patrick J's patron for four years, has 30 stitches in her head.

A CAT scan showed no broken bones. She was released from the hospital late yesterday after more X-rays.

Kitchen manager Chris Barrow, 20, recalled hearing the *crash* and feeling the building shake. He ran into the dining room to help the injured.

"The siren was going off, and the tires were still rolling," he said of the upside-down truck.

Rundio arrived minutes after the accident and immediately started counting heads.

One patron was in the restroom when concrete pounded the chair where he had been sitting.

Bartender Charles "Adam" Breakiron just missed being hit by cinder blocks and escaped with minor cuts from flying liquor bottles.

Raphael expected to meet with insurance adjusters yesterday.

He said that Patrick J's will reopen, but he doesn't know whether that will require complete reconstruction.

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DRIVER SAYS BRAKES FAILED ON FIRETRUCK

Published: Wednesday, July 17, 2002

NEWS 01A

By Bruce Cadwallader

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Correction: CORRECTION PUBLISHED JULY 19, 2002 -- The Columbus Fire *Ladder* 13 truck damaged in a minor accident a week before a replacement firetruck hit Patrick J's Bar & Grille on Monday was driven by firefighter John Vacheresse. Because of incorrect information provided by a battalion chief, The Dispatch incorrectly reported on Page A1 Wednesday that firefighter Andrew Trott was the driver in both accidents.

The driver of a 35-ton firetruck told his supervisors after a *crash* on Monday that he had no brakes and was "picking a hole to *crash* into" when his truck flipped and slid into a Clintonville bar.

The *crash* into Patrick J's Bar & Grille, 2711 N. High St., injured the four firefighters on the *ladder* truck, as well as four patrons and an employee inside the bar.

Three people remained hospitalized yesterday.

"There was definitely a failure of the vehicle. They knew they were going to *crash*," Battalion Chief Mark DeVine said yesterday. "I'm saying the brakes didn't work."

A Columbus police investigation and an internal safety investigation by the Fire Division are pending.

In addition, a union leader said he wants an independent analysis of the vehicle. It was a backup truck being used because the *Ladder* 13 truck was out of commission after an accident.

Firefighter Andrew Trott was driving both times.

He had damaged the undercarriage of the regular vehicle a few days earlier when he drove over a boulder at a fire scene, DeVine said.

In Monday's accident, Trott told officials he chose a sharp left turn onto N. High from Arcadia Avenue as the best option once he realized the truck had no brakes.

A right turn, he said, would have sent him into traffic stopped on N. High; going straight would have sent the truck into a deep ravine and could have been fatal to the firefighters on board.

When Trott attempted to turn left, the back of the truck skidded over a curb, the truck flipped upside-down and then slid into the side of Patrick J's.

James E. Davis, first vice president for the International Association of Fire Fighters Local 67, said he talked yesterday with three of the four firefighters who were on the truck.

"They basically shared with us that they got to the top of the hill and they had no brakes coming to the bottom of that hill," Davis said.

Dennis Hammond -- the tillerman, the firefighter who drives from the back of the truck -- was thrown to the pavement.

The 35-year-old suffered broken bones in his face and was in fair condition last night at Riverside Methodist Hospitals.

Fire Division spokeswoman Kelly McGuire said she didn't know whether Hammond and the other firefighters were wearing their seat belts.

Lt. Rick Conti, 41, who was in the front seat, has knee injuries and a broken leg. He is in fair condition at Ohio State University Medical Center.

Trott, 30, and firefighter John Vacheresse, 36, were treated for minor injuries.

Of those injured inside the bar, Dorothy Toki, 43, remains in serious condition at OSU Medical Center.

Rae Laufenburger, 34, was released yesterday from Riverside.

Three others -- Albert Toki, 22; bartender Charles "Adam" Breakiron, 28; and Scott Harper, 37, were treated for minor cuts.

The *ladder* truck was heading to an Ohio State math classroom on W. 18th Avenue. It turned out to be a false alarm.

DeVine and other safety officials said the maintenance records of the replacement truck, a 1991 American LaFrance *ladder* truck, have been seized for the police investigation.

The *ladder* truck that crashed had been used without incident for four years at Station 24 on Morse Road near Northland Mall, Fire Lt. John Simpkins said.

"We never had any problems with it," he said.

In March, the truck went to a station near Polaris Fashion Place, as an extra *ladder* truck.

The useful life of firetrucks is about 10 years, Simpkins said.

"They start getting a lot of breakdowns after that," he said.

No one yesterday could say when the truck was last inspected, but DeVine said he saw Station 13 firefighters checking it before the accident at 5:48 p.m. Monday.

"This was the first emergency run after they got it," DeVine said. "After they discovered the

problem, they were along for the ride at that point."

DeVine said that skid marks on Arcadia Avenue likely were left by the truck as it slid sideways, not as a result of the brakes being applied.

Assistant Fire Chief Richard Braun said the division won't change its policy concerning fleet maintenance because of the *crash*. He didn't have details about that policy.

"We take into consideration the miles and the hours of use before we decide whether to pull a truck out of service," Braun said. "We are continually training and conducting preventive maintenance."

Battalion Chief Mike Foote of the division's fleet-safety committee said Columbus firefighters were involved in 50 accidents last year out of 135,000 emergency runs.

Of the 50, drivers were at fault in 36 of the crashes, or 72 percent of the time.

A similar firetruck *crash* occurred at Arcadia Avenue and N. High in December 1963. One firefighter was injured when two firetrucks collided en route to an explosion at OSU.

Dispatch Staff Reporters Mark Ferencik and Matthew Marx contributed to this story.

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Illustration: Photo appeared in newspaper, not in the archive.

Photo caption: (1) NEAL C. LAURON | DISPATCH

Firefighters from Station 13 search for equipment that might have fallen off the truck that crashed into Patrick J's Bar & Grille. The Columbus Police and Fire divisions will investigate Monday evening's *crash*.

(4) Injured when their firetruck flipped and hit a bar Monday were, clockwise from upper left, Lt. Rick Conti; Dennis Hammond; John Vacheresse and Andrew Trott.

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SAFETY RECALL PUTS 10 COLUMBUS FIRETRUCKS OUT OF SERVICE

Brake flaw not related to recent *crash*

Published: Friday, August 2, 2002

NEWS 03B

By Bruce Cadwallader

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Ten Columbus firetrucks were taken off the streets this week after the city received a safety recall about faulty brakes.

The recall on the International trucks comes two weeks after a *ladder* truck with a history of brake problems crashed into a N. High Street restaurant, injuring nine people, including four firefighters.

The *ladder* truck was made by a different company, American LaFrance.

The 10 International trucks are parked behind the city garage on Greenlawn Avenue. Mechanics from a Hilliard dealership are expected to have the brakes repaired by today, Fire Division spokesman Mike Fultz said.

According to the recall, received Monday by the division, a brass fitting in the air-brake systems of some International trucks and buses is prone to damage from vibration. That could lead to brake failure or "extended stopping distance."

"If the fitting breaks, all rear- axle service brakes will be lost," according to the recall.

None of the affected vehicles experienced brake failure, fire officials said.

Chief Ned Pettus ordered the trucks removed from service when he heard about the recall.

"We have an enhanced awareness of brake problems right now. Chief Pettus did the right thing," said Lt. Jack Reall, firefighters union president.

Company spokesman Roy Wiley said the recall affects 153,000 trucks and buses made between July 1997 and March 2002.

"The fix is relatively simple and we are only aware of three accidents, in which there were

no injuries and no fatalities from this defect," Wiley said. None of the accidents occurred in Ohio or involved firetrucks, he said.

The Fire Division relied on replacement trucks while the 10 engines were fixed.

The *ladder* truck that slid into Patrick J's restaurant on July 15 was a replacement vehicle. The driver of that truck told his supervisors he had no brakes when he tried to slow down to turn from Arcadia Avenue onto N. High Street.

Fire and city officials are still investigating that accident.

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POLICE CLEAR DRIVER OF FIRETRUCK

Accident report blames malfunctioning brakes for July *crash* into tavern

Published: Wednesday, August 14, 2002

NEWS 01B

By Bruce Cadwallader

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A police accident report supports Columbus firefighters' statements that the brakes failed on their 35-ton *ladder* truck before it crashed into a tavern, injuring nine people.

The probe cleared the driver, firefighter Andy Trott, of any traffic violations in connection with the July *crash* of *ladder* truck XL33 into Patrick J's Bar & Grille.

According to the summary from the lead police detective, accident investigators concluded there was a "mechanical malfunction."

"It was determined the truck had a diminished braking capacity. It was also determined that the vehicle would not have been capable of stopping, given the circumstances that existed at the time of the *crash*," accident investigator David Cornute wrote.

Release of the entire 100-page report has been delayed so that the legal adviser to police has time to review it, police spokesman Sgt. Earl Smith said.

Maintenance records on the 10-year-old replacement truck show a six-year history of brake problems. City officials have produced no evidence that fleet mechanics fixed the brakes after a captain ordered it to the shop July 2.

Trott, 30, said immediately after the *crash* that the vehicle, which was on an emergency run, had no brakes as he tried to turn south onto N. High Street from Arcadia Avenue.

Skid marks at the scene weren't from brakes, but from the tires skidding sideways, Cornute wrote.

Battalion Chief Mark DeVine said the report vindicates the firefighters.

"The brakes were faulty because they were out of adjustment is what I'm hearing," DeVine said.

Union President Lt. Jack Reall said the report likely will be reviewed by the Department of Public Safety. "Now the real work begins. We need to find the solutions to make sure our members and the public feel safe," he said.

All four firefighters and five civilians injured that day are out of the hospital. The firefighters have not returned to work, DeVine said.

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FIRETRUCK PROBE

BRAKE REPAIRS NEVER MADE

Vehicle in city garage 13 days before *crash*, safety records show

Published: Thursday, August 15, 2002

NEWS 01A

By Bruce Cadwallader

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

For 13 days before it slammed into a restaurant, a Columbus firetruck sat parked at a city garage without having its brakes repaired, a city official acknowledged yesterday.

"The records we have clearly show we did not fix the truck," said Mary Webster, assistant public service director, "but it was because we did not know it was brought in and needed to be fixed."

Webster's comments came the same day police released the full report on their investigation of the July 15 accident. It said the brakes on *ladder* truck XL33 had been neglected.

"I found no evidence of any preventative maintenance to the brake system at any of the six brake (inspection) points. The slack adjusters were caked in grime, with no evidence that the brakes had recently been adjusted," Columbus detective Mark Rice wrote in his summary.

He also found that emergency brakes on the rig's trailer were not working properly.

"It is my opinion that improperly adjusted brakes were the cause of this *crash*. The operator of XL33 could not have prevented this *crash* from occurring," Rice wrote.

An independent consultant concurred.

"At the time I inspected the truck, there was no sign of recent maintenance work like grease and oil," wrote Robert Reed, a West Side truck mechanic for 25 years.

Officials earlier said there was no evidence the brakes had been repaired.

Webster said the incident points to a glaring breakdown in communication.

"We intend to work with the fire department and other departments to make sure this never happens again," she said.

A fire captain said he sent XL33 to the maintenance garage on Greenlawn Avenue on July 2 to have the brakes checked. The vehicle was dropped off after the garage closed so the captain left a voice-mail message for the garage supervisor.

Webster said the supervisor somehow never got the voice-mail message. The Fire Division at the time did not file written requests for repair work.

Four days before the *crash*, Battalion Chief Mike Foote had proposed the Fire Division use the same written forms other city departments use when taking in a vehicle for maintenance. Fire Chief Ned Pettus has approved the idea.

It's unknown what communication there was between the Station 13 firefighter who picked up the truck and mechanics, said Battalion Chief Mike Fultz, division spokesman. That will be among the items reviewed by the division's professional standards unit.

Station 13 needed the rig as a replacement while its own *ladder* truck was being repaired.

Deputy Police Chief Stephen P. Gammill wrote in a memo yesterday that the driver of XL33, Firefighter Andy Trott, should not face traffic or criminal charges because the brakes malfunctioned.

Trott told investigators that the brakes failed as he tried to turn left onto N. High Street from Arcadia Avenue. The rig skidded sideways into Patrick J's Bar & Grille. Five patrons and the four firefighters on the vehicle were injured but have been released from hospitals.

"This was a disaster waiting to happen," said Lt. Jack Reall, president of Local 67 of the firefighters union.

The union and Columbus police brass now expect Safety Director Mitchell Brown's office to conduct an administrative review of procedures.

Brown could not be reached for comment.

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LADDER TRUCKS' BRAKES FLUNK

Fire Division has most repaired after special inspection conducted by state

Published: Friday, October 25, 2002

NEWS 01A

By Matthew Marx and Jodi Nirode

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Most of the Columbus Fire Division's *ladder* trucks needed brake repairs for air leaks or adjustments after a recent inspection, a fire official said last night.

Inspectors from the Ohio Department of Transportation were hired to examine 20 *ladder* trucks as part of an effort to improve maintenance after a July 15 accident. Nine people, including four firefighters, were injured when a *ladder* truck crashed into a N. High Street bar.

Most of the trucks' brakes were repaired or adjusted immediately after ODOT's bumper-to-bumper inspections, Battalion Chief Mike Fultz said last night.

"There were several cases of brakes out of adjustment -- probably one of the more dangerous cases that we were worried about," he said. "When brakes are out of adjustment, the amount of air it takes to activate the brakes might be off and the leaks might be a significant problem."

Fultz did not have the report with him and did not know the exact number of trucks found with brake problems, but said that "most" of them did.

The division's two remaining *ladder* trucks had been sent to the manufacturer before the inspections for other problems.

The inspections and repairs were made over several days this month at the maintenance garage on Greenlawn Avenue, Fultz said. "I don't know if we had to keep anybody's *ladder* truck overnight."

Fire Chief Ned Pettus declined to comment when contacted at home last night.

Jack Reall, president of Local 67 of the International Association of Fire Fighters, said he will ask the City Council to ensure that all fire vehicles are inspected.

"We have a serious problem with identifying how our trucks are maintained and tracked," he said.

"We need to know that the trucks are safe for our members and safe for the citizens."

Reall said most of the 20 *ladder* trucks inspected had significant problems in components such as brakes, suspension or frames.

Most were repaired and sent back into service. But a couple continue to be out of service and in need of repairs, he said.

Each of the *ladder* trucks inspected had at least 10 minor problems such as missing dashboard knobs or burned-out bulbs on the dashboard and interior lights, Fultz said.

"There are quite a few examples of bulbs burned out. That's something we need to pay better attention to," he said.

Many of those problems haven't been fixed, he said, because the trucks remain in operation. "It's not something that you take a \$650,000 vehicle off the road for. If you break a little knob but you can still use it, you write it down in the back of your book."

For those minor problems, work orders were written and repairs will gradually be made, he said.

One backup truck was taken out of service completely for a crack in the frame.

The city's Fleet Management Department is in charge of fixing the vehicles and performing routine maintenance.

However, fire officials have not passed along a copy of the report showing the extent of the problems, said Mary Webster, assistant director of the Public Service Department, which includes fleet management.

The final report from ODOT is due next week, Fultz said.

He said the division wants to send its mechanics out for extra training and is considering training its firefighters for more thorough inspections.

In the July *crash*, a backup *ladder* truck slammed into Patrick J's Bar & Grille in Clintonville as the driver was trying to turn south onto N. High Street from Arcadia Avenue. Five patrons and the four firefighters were injured.

The truck had been dropped off at the city's repair garage 13 days before, but the repairs were never made, a police investigation showed.

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FIRETRUCKS' CONDITION 'SHOCKED' INSPECTOR

19 of 20 had flaws serious enough to take them off streets

Published: Saturday, October 26, 2002

NEWS 01A

By Jeb Phillips

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The expert who inspected 20 of the Columbus Fire Division's 22 **ladder** trucks this month said he found "appalling" safety problems that could have taken all but one of the trucks out of service.

"I was shocked at the condition of the fleet," said Robert Reed, an independent maintenance consultant brought in by the division to examine the trucks.

Reed worked with the city during the investigation of the July 15 **ladder** truck accident that injured nine. Investigators, including Reed, found that the truck's brakes hadn't been properly maintained.

Reed's recent inspections came as a result of the July **crash**, said Battalion Chief Mike Fultz, a Fire Division spokesman. A **ladder** truck crashed into a bar as it tried to turn onto N. High Street, injuring five bar patrons and the four firefighters on the truck.

The inspections weren't conducted by the Ohio Department of Transportation, as The Dispatch erroneously reported yesterday.

During the past few weeks, Reed said, he found "mass air-brake defects" in 11 **ladder** trucks. Some air brakes had leaks, but of more concern to Reed were the broken buzzers and lights designed to warn the **ladder** truck's driver of brake defects.

A State Highway Patrol official briefly reviewed Reed's preliminary report for The Dispatch. He said that, in many cases, putting the trucks out of service would be a judgment call on the part of a trooper or inspector.

For instance, some of a truck's brakes might be leaking air, but if 80 percent of the truck's brakes were functional, the vehicle could be allowed on the road, he said. Reed's preliminary report indicated that all brakes were out of adjustment on two **ladder** trucks.

However, a truck without a functioning brake-defect warning system would be taken off the

road, said the patrol official, who asked not to be named. Reed said that several trucks had damaged warning systems.

Other items that Reed listed, such as certain broken marking lights, could be important on a fire vehicle but wouldn't keep a commercial truck off the road, the patrol official said.

Reed also noted problems with power steering in six trucks and broken steering columns in two others, he said.

A large vehicle such as a ***ladder*** truck needs brake checks every day and should have an adjustment every two weeks, Reed said. Fultz said there is no such standard for the city's fleet; vehicles are brought in for repairs when something is wrong, and firefighters conduct some routine services.

Ron Cottrill, director of fleet management for the city, said vehicles also get preventive maintenance checks at certain intervals -- for example, after every 100 hours of service. He said he could not comment specifically on Reed's reports, but that he welcomed another inspector's opinions.

Reed's report will be formally submitted to the city Monday.

"We're always reviewing our policies and procedures for the best way to service our equipment," Cottrill said. "I certainly think that fleet management does a good job with the fleet."

Mary Webster, assistant director of the city's Public Service Department, said that Director Linda K. Page had not seen the report and could not comment on it. But Page has full confidence in the city's fleet-management operation, Webster said.

Reed used national commercial-vehicle guidelines to evaluate the ***ladder*** trucks. Fire and some other government vehicles are exempt from those standards, but the State Highway Patrol uses them to evaluate large trucks and remove them from service if they have serious violations.

The Fire Division has no similar guidelines, so Reed fit the national guidelines to the ***ladder*** trucks. Fultz said the division is in the process of deciding whether to use the national guidelines or other standards to evaluate its vehicles.

Reed said that under the national standards, all but one of the 20 ***ladder*** trucks he inspected could have been pulled off the streets. The division's remaining two ***ladder*** trucks were being worked on at the manufacturer, so they weren't inspected, Fultz said.

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PROBERS: FIREFIGHTERS DIDN'T SPEAK UP

Fire Division should handle maintenance of its trucks, report says

Published: Wednesday, October 30, 2002

NEWS 01C

By Mark Ferencik and Bruce Cadwallader

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

On one hand, an internal Columbus Fire Division report blames three firefighters for not properly reporting brake problems on a *ladder* truck that smashed into a bar, injuring nine people.

On the other -- in the same report -- another fire official says the only way to make sure it doesn't happen again is to have the Fire Division take over operation of the city garage where its vehicles are maintained.

But the city agency operating the garage said it's already made improvements to ensure that repairs are properly made.

Assistant Fire Chief Karry Ellis had recommended in August that the Fire Division take over the Greenlawn Avenue garage from the Public Service Department's fleet-management division.

That recommendation was in a report issued last week on the investigation of the July 15 accident in which *ladder* truck XL33 crashed into Patrick J's Bar & Grille. The truck rammed the bar after it couldn't make a turn onto N. High Street from Arcadia Avenue. Five bar patrons and four firefighters were injured.

Before the *crash*, the truck had sat at the Greenlawn shop for 13 days awaiting brake repairs. Firefighters left no order telling mechanics what work needed to be done, fleet management has said.

Maintenance crews apparently never questioned why the truck was there, and released it without making the repairs.

Ellis contends that putting the maintenance crews under Fire Division authority would increase accountability and renew morale.

"Confidence must be restored to the members," he wrote. "Changes must be visible and workable for this to be seen and accepted by the members," Ellis wrote.

Chief Ned Pettus Jr. is considering the recommendations, his spokesman said.

The report listed a series of miscommunications and judgment errors made by firefighters before the XL33 *crash*.

Conducted by fire Capt. Stewart Atwood, the investigation found that:

- * A breakdown in communication was a "major factor" in the truck's not being repaired at the Greenlawn shop.

- * Several firefighters noticed that the truck's air brakes were losing pressure in June, but didn't inform maintenance workers until July 2, when it was taken in for repairs.

- * One firefighter, while inspecting hydrants, revved the engine to build up enough air pressure to silence an annoying low-pressure warning buzzer.

- * The truck was among 137 fire vehicles overdue for regular preventive maintenance. Firetruck drivers failed to notice when maintenance was due. Trucks should be serviced after every 100 hours of service under fleet rules.

- * The fire captain appointed maintenance supervisor at the Greenlawn shop said he was "forced" to take the job, had no training, and didn't know he should notify stations when vehicles were due for preventive maintenance.

"The shop and fleet management do not have a reliable fail-safe mechanism to fall back on if the driver does not notify anyone," Atwood wrote.

The three firefighters who could be disciplined -- a battalion chief, a lieutenant and a firefighter -- told Atwood they were aware in June of brake problems with XL33 when it was at Fire Station 15 on E. Livingston Avenue.

No one had been disciplined as of yesterday, Battalion Chief Mike Fultz said.

The truck, which rotated among stations as a backup vehicle, was based at Station 33 on Lazelle Road near Polaris when firefighters there noticed the brake problems.

It was taken to the Greenlawn shop July 2. A captain said he left a voice-mail message for a fleet supervisor saying the brakes needed to be checked.

The fire crew dropping off the truck arrived after the shop had closed, and the shop supervisor said he never received the captain's voice mail.

The truck was released to Station 13 on Arcadia Avenue in Clintonville eight hours before the *crash*.

Since the accident, the city has instituted guidelines for requesting repairs, including a red-green tag system to indicate which trucks have been repaired. The tags -- red means the vehicle is awaiting repairs and green means the repairs have been made -- are attached to the steering wheels.

"Having a handshake system for getting trucks fixed did not work," said Mike Brown, spokesman for Mayor Michael B. Coleman.

Fleet Management Administrator Ron Cottrill said the Greenlawn shop is adding shifts and extending its hours from 3:30 to 10 p.m.

Cottrill said fleet supervisors will be more diligent about keeping track of vehicles parked at the shop.

Brown said the mayor wants the Fire Division and fleet management to better communicate and become more accountable for repairs.

Several city officials are expected to meet Thursday to discuss the issue.

The president of the local firefighters union, Lt. Jack Reall, is calling on Chief Pettus to seek immediate safety inspections of all fire vehicles.

"In light of all the supporting evidence, I believe we need to determine the extent of this problem in our fleet," Reall said. "Our members deserve the confidence that their vehicle is safe for operations at all times."

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Illustration: Photo appeared in newspaper, not in the archive.

Photo caption: ERIC ALBRECHT | DISPATCH

Dan Eaves, foreground, and Tommy Hunt work on a firetruck at the Greenlawn Avenue garage. One fire official recommended that the Fire Division take over maintenance from the Public Service Department.

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The Columbus Dispatch

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SOME PROBLEMS ILLUMINATED BY FIRETRUCK *CRASH* STILL LINGER

Published: Thursday, July 24, 2003

NEWS 08C

By Bruce Cadwallader

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A year after a Columbus *ladder* truck barreled into a N. High Street tavern, city officials continue to battle an aging fire fleet, rising maintenance costs and two lawsuits.

And John Raphael, the owner of Patrick J's Bar and Grille, said this week he's considering legal action against the city.

"We fully expect to sit down with the city soon" to discuss a settlement, said Raphael, who said he was busy until April rebuilding his business at 2711 N. High St., in the northern end of the University District.

"Business has been good," he said. "Our regulars are starting to come back. Everyone has had a pretty good attitude."

The city's Fire Division was stunned a year ago July 15 when a 35-ton reserve *ladder* truck known as XL-33 left on an emergency run from the Arcadia Avenue station and hit the tavern.

While making a left turn from Arcadia Avenue onto N. High Street, the truck's brakes failed and it rolled onto its side and skidded into Patrick J's during a lull in afternoon business.

The *crash* injured the four firefighters on board and five bar patrons inside.

Four of the patrons -- Dorothy Toki, her two children

Firetruck repairs

Since last year's *crash* of a city firetruck into a N. High Street bar, the city has made these changes in procedures for repairing and maintaining fire vehicles.

- * A communications task force meets monthly to discuss fleet-maintenance issues.

- * Maintenance-request forms must be filled out by firefighters, dated, time-stamped and personally handed to a shop supervisor when a truck is dropped off for service.

- * When a truck is taken out of service, a maintenance or fire supervisor must place a red tag on the steering wheel. A green tag on the wheel indicates the repairs have been made.

- * Repair records must be signed by a supervisor as they are completed and then entered into a Fleet Division computer before the truck is released for duty.

- * A fire-equipment liaison officer monitors and tracks repairs for each vehicle.

- * A windshield sticker reminds firefighters when a vehicle is due

and Rae Laufenburger -- have filed lawsuits, asking for undisclosed sums, said Scott Varner, a spokesman for City Attorney Richard C. Pfeiffer Jr.

Trials are months away.

The driver of the *ladder* truck was cleared of wrongdoing by a police investigation, but Pfeiffer's office is doing its own examination into what happened for trial preparation, Varner said.

The city said the injured firefighters all have returned to duty.

The truck had been taken in for brake repairs 13 days before the *crash*, which occurred on its first run after returning to service. City mechanics and firefighters did not communicate to each other about what was wrong with the truck, city officials said later, and repairs were never done.

Since the *crash*, fleet-maintenance and fire officials have improved communication to ensure that repairs are better documented and kept up-to-date, they said. But a growing concern is the aging fleet and the lack of money to buy new vehicles.

"I'm convinced that we are better off today than we were a year ago, but we need equipment and a new garage," Assistant Fire Chief Karry Ellis said.

"Right now I have only two or three extra engines and one (extra) *ladder* truck in reserve. We haven't bought any new apparatus in the past three years."

And, he said, a 1998 study recommended closure of the maintenance shop, which was built in 1941. The shop at 200 Greenlawn Ave. is not large enough to handle newer firetrucks and has no racks to hold the trucks, he said.

The ability to efficiently take care of routine maintenance is even more important now because the fleet is old, he said.

Seven of the city's 33 engines and one of 16 *ladder* trucks have been in service for at least 14 years and should have been mothballed years ago, he said.

Just last week, five engines were taken out of service at one time because of a brake recall. Thirteen other vehicles were out of service yesterday for mechanical problems, Ellis said.

City officials have a Christmas wish list to sell bonds at the end of the year to purchase more fire equipment -- up to six new engines, six medic vehicles, two *ladders* and two rescue trucks.

Once ordered, the vehicles take up to 13 months to build.

If the city budget had remained healthy, the Fire Division would have bought at least 10

for routine maintenance. More inspections -- including brakes -- are conducted now when a truck is out of service.

* Fleet mechanics undergo training and are certified through the Automotive Service Excellence program to handle firetrucks and hydraulic brakes.

* Work hours at the maintenance shop have been extended to 10 p.m. from 4:30 p.m.; a second shift has been added.

* The City Council has approved a \$45,000 contract with a consultant to study fleet-repair procedures.

* All Fire Division trucks annually undergo an axle-to-axle analysis of brake parts.

Source: Division of Public Service

new vehicles in the past three years, Ellis said.

In the meantime, all firefighters will be trained to understand the hydraulic braking systems on the trucks they drive. A class for a few Fire Division mechanics was held Tuesday.

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Illustration: Photo appeared in newspaper, not in the archive.

Photo caption: NEAL C. LAURON | DISPATCH

Mechanic Wes Chandler checks the brakes on a *ladder* truck at the Greenlawn Avenue shop.

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CITY REPORT ON *CRASH* OF FIRETRUCK COMPLETED

Task force cites poor communication, including computers that are incompatible

Published: Friday, May 30, 2003

NEWS 03B

By Kevin Mayhood

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Nearly a year after a *ladder* truck's brakes failed and it crashed into a N. High Street tavern, injuring nine, a task force has concluded that the Columbus Division of Fire and Division of Fleet Management need to communicate better.

But the Fire Division still won't take over maintenance of its trucks, a suggestion that had been discussed after the *crash*. At the time, 19 of the Fire Division's 20 *ladder* trucks were found to have brake problems.

"We don't need to manage anyone in Fleet, we just need to be able to talk the same language," Battalion Chief Mike Fultz said.

The review, released this week, comes from a nine-member task force that included representatives from the city's fire, fleet, refuse-collection and technology departments.

The review also spotlighted the city's lack of infrastructure when it comes to communicating. Not all fire stations have computers to communicate with other stations, and Fleet Management's computerized maintenance records aren't compatible with the division's computers, city officials said.

That means requests for repairs and confirmations of completed work have to be done on paper. Before the *crash*, much of that was done by phone.

Since the accident, the Fire and Fleet divisions have adopted a practice of placing a red tag on the steering wheel of each truck dropped off for repairs. The red tag is replaced with a green one when repairs are completed.

The truck that smashed into Patrick J's in July had been brought to Fleet's Greenlawn Avenue facility for repairs. It sat there 13 days, then was taken back without being fixed.

The air brakes failed as the truck turned from Arcadia Avenue onto N. High. Four

firefighters and five bar patrons were hurt when the truck flipped and slid into Patrick J's.

"We don't know if it was associated with maintenance," Fultz said. "We were looking for more safety in the future."

The task force also recommended that firefighters receive training to check truck brakes themselves. Fleet mechanics should become certified in emergency-equipment maintenance, the report also says.

Fleet mechanics are beginning to maintain firetrucks according to National Fire Protection Association standards. They had been relying on similar standards set for heavy equipment, said Mary Carran Webster, assistant director of the city's Public Service Department, which oversees Fleet.

The task force also recommended a new maintenance facility. City officials said a tight budget likely will delay that and other costly recommendations.

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Illustration: Photo appeared in newspaper, not in the archive.

Photo caption: FILE PHOTO

Four firefighters and five patrons were injured in July when faulty brakes caused a *ladder* truck to *crash* into Patrick J's while turning from Arcadia Avenue onto N. High Street.

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FIREMAN NOW BLAMED IN *CRASH*

New studies of 2002 tavern accident designed to shield city from lawsuits, union leader says

Published: Saturday, October 11, 2003

NEWS 01A

By Mark Ferenchik

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Two new city reports suggest the blame for a Columbus firetruck slamming into a tavern last year rests with the firefighter at the wheel.

But an angry firefighters union leader said the reports -- which conflict with a police investigation that blamed poor maintenance for the *crash* -- were sought by the city to defend itself in case the injured firefighters sue.

The new reports said the *crash* was caused when firefighter Andy Trott either didn't let the air pressure in the *ladder* truck build up long enough for the air brakes to work properly before heading out on the run, or pumped the brakes and used the air horn, which bled pressure from the brakes as the truck barreled down Arcadia Avenue.

The reports were prepared by FTI/SEA Consulting of Columbus and MV Engineering of Cincinnati.

Assistant City Attorney Glenn B. Redick said Michael F. Colley, the attorney representing Trott and firefighters Richard Conti, John Vacheresse and Dennis Hammond, told him the four had a claim if the city knew the brakes were defective and didn't do anything about them.

Redick said he asked for the new reports because the original investigation citing poor maintenance didn't seem right to him.

"There's no question the brakes failed," Redick said. "The question is what caused the brakes to fail."

Jack Reall, president of the Columbus firefighters union, was outraged that Trott was being blamed.

"I expect nothing less from the city than to do a good job of protecting themselves," Reall said. "Taking aim at the firefighters is unacceptable."

Police cleared Trott in connection with the *crash*. Colley could not be reached last night.

"All they have is inadequate air pressure," Recall said. "There's no evidence in those reports that maintenance was not a problem."

The city has been sued by four patrons of Patrick J's Bar & Grille, 2711 N. High St., who were injured in the *crash* July 15, 2002.

Redick said he didn't ask for the reports just to protect the city.

"The reason I asked for these reports was because I was troubled by the original report," Redick said.

He said he interpreted the reports as saying maintenance did not play a part in the *crash*.

However, truck inspector Robert Reed and Columbus police detective Mark Rice last year said *ladder* truck No. XL33 had sat at a city garage for 13 days before the *crash* without having its brakes repaired.

Reed said there was no sign of recent maintenance work on the brakes. Rice said there was no evidence the brakes had been recently adjusted.

But the MV Consulting report said it was possible that the air pressure in the brake system hadn't built up to a sufficient level. The report said Trott ran the truck for only 15 seconds before pulling out of Station 13 on a run.

"There wasn't enough time to let the air get into the system," Redick said.

MV engineer Daniel Aerni also wrote, "It is also possible that the use of the air horn by Mr. Trott and the reported pumping of the brakes by him prior to the overturning of the truck contributed to a loss of lack of air pressure."

The design of the braking system also might have played a role, he wrote.

The FTI/SEA report estimated the truck was going 40 mph to 45 mph when it began to leave tire marks on Arcadia and about 20 mph to 26 mph when it hit Patrick J's.

The two reports were completed in May and July respectively, but the city attorney's office didn't release them until yesterday.

Redick said Mayor Michael B. Coleman's office was briefed on the report, along with safety officials and Public Service Director Linda K. Page.

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