

News on Pier 34 is expected today

L&I asked to investigator for early account of collapse

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By Jacqueline Soteropoulos, Craig McCoy
and Thomas J. Gibbons Jr.
Inquirer Staff Writers
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City inspectors expect to receive a preliminary indication today of what caused the collapse of Pier 34 last week, killing three young women.

Ed McLaughlin, commissioner of the Department of Licenses and Inspections, said the city had asked investigators with Urban Engineers, a private company, to provide an initial account of what triggered the pier's failure, while still working on their final report.

The firm also hopes to complete its on-site inspection of the wreckage today, said L&I Deputy Commissioner David Perri.

Some clues, including cracks in the surface of the pier and the destruction of the sea wall on the night of the collapse, could indicate that the 91-year-old timber piles supporting the structure had fallen out of alignment, he said.

Perri compared a pier with askew piles to a table with weak legs that could suddenly shift and collapse.

"If it's not corrected, those piles will fail," he said. "The whole thing falls away. It's like a house of cards."

Concurrent with the L&I investigation is a police probe to determine whether criminal charges should be filed in the case.

Police are focusing on Eli Karetny, operator of the nightclub Heat, which was on the pier.

Just days before the collapse, Karetny hired Commerce Construction Corp. to investigate a crack in the structure's surface.

Divers dispatched by Commerce found that the underbelly of the pier "needed a lot of repairs...the underneath pilings were old and damaged," said one investigator, who asked that his name not be used.

On May 17, the day before the pier collapse, Commerce gave Karetny a report, a city official said.

Detectives met again yesterday with officials of Commerce Construction, including company president Terry Zettle.

"(Zettle) almost predicted it," said the official, referring to the pier collapse.

Zettle declined to speak to reporters as he entered police headquarters yesterday.

Wednesday, however, he told the Philadelphia Daily News that he was surprised to learn that the nightclub had opened after his firm made its report to Karetny.

"We were amazed that they had people on the pier after we told them of what we had found," Zettle told the Daily News.

Asked about the possibility of criminal charges being filed in the case, a detective assigned to the probe replied that it was much too early in the investigation to reach that conclusion.

"There's no smoking gun," he said. "We're not sure where (the investigation is) going yet."

A spokeswoman for Karetny's attorneys declined to comment yesterday, citing the investigation by homicide detectives.

About 140 feet of Pier 34 collapsed into the Delaware River May 18, including an outdoor patio at the rear of the pier and a bar and storage area built in 1992 behind the nightclub.

Yesterday, Perri gave reporters a brief history of the pier.

Pier 34 was built in 1909, significantly extending and expanding an older pier.

Yellow pine piles, from 50 to 70 feet long and 18 inches in diameter, were driven deep into the river bed.

More than 2,500 piles, set in orderly rows and columns approximately 4 1/2 feet apart, form the foundation of the pier.

A thick wooden platform caps the piles and supports fill dirt eight feet deep and surrounded by a thick cement seawall.

Layers of pavement cover the dirt and form the top surface of the pier.

The pier was designed not only to withstand bumps from big ships, but also to bear a train on tracks that once stretched its length.

"It was a pretty ingenious design. It worked well in its time," Perri said. "This was graded to withstand tremendous loads."

But Perri said piers of this type were also high-maintenance structures.

In 1995, a portion of Pier 34's west end collapsed after a winter of heavy ice buildup damaged the pilings.

A structural survey completed then rated the rest of the pier in fair condition and needing maintenance, McLaughlin said.

Perri said investigators believe the two collapses were unrelated. The nightclub was on the opposite end of the pier.

Mayor Street is asking all pier owners to submit engineering reports to the city by June 30 declaring their piers safe.

Officials say the city also wants to institute regular inspections and will review how other cities monitor their piers.

"We want to make sure this never, ever happens again," McLaughlin said.