

# After fatal Somers blaze, officials urge public to practice fire safety

By Jesse Leavenworth  
STAFF WRITER

House fires can spread quickly, often leaving residents no more than a minute or two after a smoke alarm sounds to escape.

The fast-moving fire in Somers a week ago in which four children died, started at the foot of the stairs on one side of a duplex, blocking escape through the front door. A kitchen table, according to fire officials, obstructed the back door.

The investigation into the blaze is ongoing and details have not emerged about how the fire started, how residents may have prepared for an emergency or how they reacted when the blaze broke out, but Somers Fire Chief John Roache said Monday



Christine Dempsey/Hearst Connecticut Media

The front of the duplex in Somers where four children died in a fast-moving blaze last week.

that most people don't realize how quickly fire spreads.

"I think it caught everyone in that house off guard," Roache said. "I think they thought they had a little more time than they actually had."

The house was equipped with smoke detectors, he said. A neighbor opened the front door and tried to douse the fire with a small extinguisher, the chief said, but the blaze was too intense and the neighbor had to back off after suffering burns.

Experts say that in only 3 1/2 minutes, a house fire can reach 1,100 degrees in rooms that are burning and 300 degrees — far above the boiling point of water and hot enough to melt plastic — in adjacent rooms. When air is hot enough, according to the National Fire Protection Association, one breath can kill.

Roache noted that smoke travels well ahead of a fire and is an even greater hazard than flames. The children who died in the Somers fire succumbed to

*Safety continues on 7*

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# Suffield High collects money for survivors of fire

By Christine Dempsey  
STAFF WRITER

SUFFIELD — A week after a house fire killed four children in Somers, another northern Connecticut town is reaching out to help the family members left behind.

Suffield High School was collecting donations instead of admission at Tuesday night's girls varsity basketball game against Coventry High School, said Athletic Director Todd Zenczak.

Members of both teams wore "Whiteley Strong" jerseys, he said. "Whiteley" is the last name of Brittany Whiteley, a former Suffield High School physical education teacher and basketball coach who lost three nephews and a niece in the fire. The three surviving siblings and the children's mother, Whiteley's sister, are staying with her in the wake of the devastating blaze, Zenczak said.

Brittany Whiteley is well-known in Suffield; she taught at the high school as recently as six weeks ago, he said. She left to work at a nonprofit organization.

"She did so much for this community by coaching, helping me with the scoreboard. I know the community's going to come out," Zenczak said — despite the forecasted rain and wind storm.

Zenczak talked to Whiteley a few days after the fire



Dave Zajac/Hearst Connecticut Media

A Somers Strong sign placed in front of Somers Congregational Church on Monday.

and learned that she needs money and basic household items because she now has four more people living with her. He started collecting donated items from the school staff and decided to collect donations of

cash and gift cards at the game.

"I probably have a thousand dollars of gift cards already," he said. "As I'm talking to you right now, a staff member is coming over with paper towels."

Admission usually costs \$5 for adults, \$2 for senior and members of the military and \$1 for other students.

The Jan. 2 fire on Quality Avenue in Somers killed four of seven Koropatkin children, Lukas, 11; Genevieve 9; Benjamin, 7; and Archer, 5. Their three older sisters survived, and the oldest, a 19-year-old, suffered serious burns to her hands.

Investigators determined the fire started near the bottom of the stairs on the first floor, where electronics were plugged in. The flames cut off access to the stairs and the front door and traveled fast through the house, which is about 100 years old and lacks fire stops between floors. A kitchen table blocked the back door, Fire Chief John Roache said.

The cause of the fire has not been determined and will be the focus of what's expected to be a lengthy probe by insurance investigators, Roache said.

All four children who died are schoolchildren, and their loss triggered an outpouring of support, from the establishment of a town fund (the Town of Somers Angel Fund, 619 Main St., Somers CT 06071) to clothes and furniture collections to GoFundMe and other fundraisers.

# 64-unit affordable housing complex OK'd in Glastonbury

By Jamila Young  
STAFF WRITER

GLASTONBURY — The Town Council has given its approval to a plan to build a 64-unit affordable housing complex at 55 Nye Road, with town officials anticipating construction to begin in 2025.

The council voted 6-0, with three members absent, on Dec. 14 to move forward with the project, which will consist of 24 one-bedroom units, 28 two-bedroom units, and 12 three-bedroom units, according to Tom Arcari of QA+M Architecture.

"We wanted to do something as a statement, that Glastonbury is interested in affordable housing, and a diverse population living in the community," council Chairman Thomas Gullotta said on Friday, adding that he prefers to call the project "workforce housing" units.

Each unit would be equipped with stone countertops, wood cabinets, and in-unit washer and dryer hookups, Arcari said.

Ten percent of the units would be handicap accessible, Arcari said, and there would be close to 150 parking spots on the property.

A waiting list would be created for applicants who qualify and applicant selection is usually on a first-come, first-serve basis, Arcari said.

Gullotta said that the discussion of building affordable housing in at the site "goes back more than three years ago," when he and former town manager Richard Johnson discussed it.

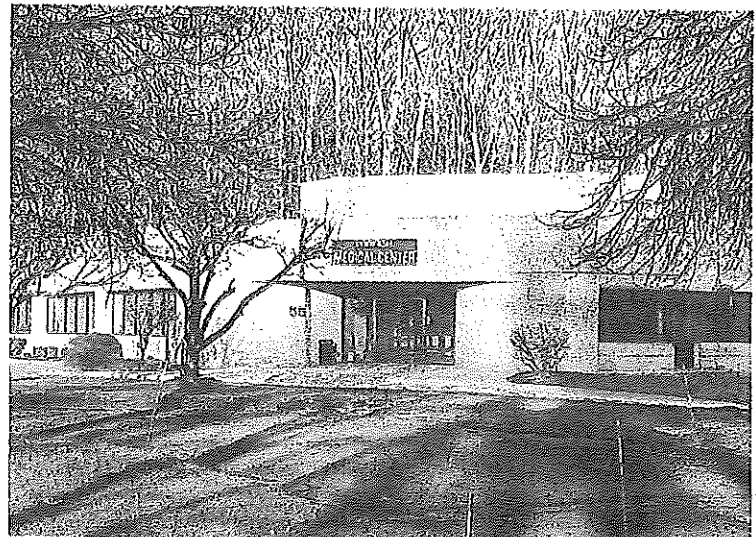
"Richard heard that the Nye Road property was going up for sale," Gullotta said.

In January 2023, the Town Council approved using American Rescue Plan Act funds to purchase the office buildings at 50 and 55 Nye Road for \$3.15 million, with a proposal to demolish 55 Nye Road to make way for the housing complex.

Town Manager Jonathan Luiz said that the building at 50 Nye Road would remain, and either be rented out to commercial tenants or be used as office space by the town or the school district.

Housing Authority Director Neil Griffin said that the total cost of construction of the housing complex has not been finalized yet, but estimates that the total project could cost around \$27 million.

Griffin said that the town will apply for various energy rebates and tax credits, including the federal Low-Income Housing



Jamila Young/Hearst Connecticut Media

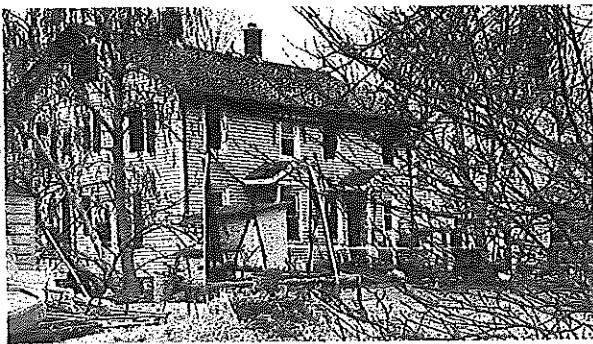
55 Nye Road in Glastonbury.

ing Tax Credit program.

The town will also use \$500,000 from a STEAP grant that it was awarded in September to construct the parking area, and will match the grant by contributing

nearly \$300,000 of its own funding.

If the Housing Authority receives the necessary funding, Griffin anticipates construction to begin in March 2025 with completion in September 2026.



Sue Danseyar/Hearst Connecticut Media

Four children were killed and others were injured in a house fire on Quality Avenue in Somers last week. This is a view of the duplex from the back yard.

## SAFETY

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smoke inhalation and burns, a spokesperson for the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner said. Lack of oxygen from smoke inhalation accounts for most fire fatalities, experts say.

Also, blocked doors and windows that prevent residents' escape may impede firefighters' entry into a burning house, Manchester Fire Chief Daniel French said. A firefighter for 26 years in Waterbury and nine in Manchester, French stressed he has no knowledge of the Somers fire, but said he has seen situations where furniture, boxes, piles of clothing and other items in front of doors made fire rescues more difficult.

And French noted that while the state mandates annual inspections of all multifamily homes of three units and more, duplexes and single-family homes are not included in the requirement, so firefighters typically do not know what they will face in those homes.

State police fire investigator Sgt. Paul Makuc, who is not investigating the Somers fire, said people often get used to using one door and don't think about another entry that can become blocked off with furniture and other items.

"I think there's always some improvements that everybody can do when it comes to clearing exits," Makuc said.

That includes clearing snow and ice from walkways and fire hydrants, he said.

The National Fire Protection Association advises these steps for residents:

- Install smoke alarms in every sleeping room and outside each sleeping area. Install alarms on every level of the home.

- Clear escape routes of anything that blocks doors and windows.

- Gather everyone in the household and make a plan. Households with children should consider drawing a floor plan of the home, marking two ways out of each room, including windows and doors.

- Choose an outside meeting place a safe distance from the front of the home where everyone can meet after escaping.

- Make sure your house number is clearly visible from the road.

- Hold home fire drills to practice the escape plan.

- Every family member must be able to escape from second-floor rooms. Escape ladders can be placed in or near windows to provide an additional escape route.

- In households with infants, older adults, and family members with mobility limitations, make sure someone is assigned to help them in an emergency.

- If windows or doors have security bars, make sure the bars have emergency release devices inside.

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**Life Tributes**

**MANCHESTER**

Gary M. Gazdzicki, Sr.  
Lucy Shea Sweeney  
Jeanne Giffin Wright

**SOMERS**

William Joseph Walker

**STAFFORD SPRINGS**

Evelyn C. Stehlik

**TOLLAND**

Justin R. Urban

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inclusion in this index is not guaranteed.

**Evelyn C. Stehlik**

Evelyn C. (Cartier) Stehlik, 95, of Stafford Springs, CT passed away peacefully on Monday, January 8, 2024 with her daughter by her side. She was born in Tolland, CT, daughter of the late Lucien and Robea (Bouchen) Cartier. Evelyn worked as a sales clerk at the Stafford Conservatories for many years. She was also a wonderful floral designer, seamstress and painter.

Evelyn is survived by her daughter, Renee Cavar; six grandchildren, Jeff Cavar, Julie Carpenter, Michelle Brothers, Ashley Tate, Amy Furness and Mark Ference; two siblings, Dorothy Armelin and Victor Cartier; and many great-grandchildren, nieces and nephews. She was predeceased by her husband, Robert S. Stehlik; two children, Sandra Ference and Nancy Tate; grandson, Michael Ference; and six siblings, Geraldine Cartier Lanagan, Roy Lucien "Butch" Cartier, Roger Cartier, Alice Ricard,



Robert Cartier and Donald Cartier.

A memorial service will be held on Saturday, January 13, 2024 at 2:00 p.m. at Introvigne Funeral Home, Inc., 51 East Main St., Stafford Springs, CT. Memorial donations may be made to the Alzheimer's Association, P.O. Box 96011, Washington, DC 20090-6001. To leave a message of sympathy for her family, please visit: [www.introvignefuneralhome.com](http://www.introvignefuneralhome.com)

**Gary M. Gazdzicki, Sr.  
1947 - 2024**



Gary M. Gazdzicki Sr., 76, of Manchester, passed away on January 6, 2024, surrounded by his family. He was born in Hartford, CT, on June 1, 1947, son of the late Frank and Mary (Shea) Gazdzicki. He is survived by his wife Sharon Tine Gazdzicki of 52 years.

A graduate of Hartford Public High school in 1966, where he then joined the United States Army and served as a Specialist 4 during the Vietnam War. He was honorably discharged in 1968, where he began working at Electric Boat. Throughout his life as an avid mechanic, he retired after many years of service as an inspector at Carlyle Johnson Machine Co. (Metronics) in 2017.

Gary was passionate about serving other veterans, as he showed this through being a past commander of The American Legion post 102 in Manchester, CT, he was also an active member of both the Vietnam Veterans and Army and Navy Clubs. Gary served the community as a Notary Public and strived to help homeless veterans find the resources they needed as a Veteran Liaison.

Gary was known as a true patriarch to his family, he especially cherished his close relationships with his grandsons. Gary loved to fish, he enjoyed woodworking and was a master at fixing cars.

Along with his wife Sharon, he is also survived by his son Gary Gazdzicki Jr. of Vernon, CT, and his daughter April and husband Matthew Gustafson of Coventry, CT. Several grandchildren in which he adored; Tyler Gustafson and fiancée Jessica Beebe, Brandon Gustafson, Scott Mankus, Jordann Karabetso, Amanda

Mankus, Mackenzie Mankus, Aiden Gazdzicki and Brody Gazdzicki. He is also survived by three sisters, Mary and husband Vincent Florida of Manchester, CT, Joan Cole of Maine and Jackie Romano of Canton, CT; brother Frank (Skip) Gazdzicki Jr. of Colchester, CT. Gary is also survived by many nieces and nephews. He was predeceased by his daughter Kimberly Gazdzicki Ahlberg, brothers Joseph Gazdzicki and Robert Gazdzicki, and sisters Sharon Laundria, and Francis (CeCe) Vermette. Gary's family would also like to thank his "adopted" daughter Kimberly Sharp for being by Gary's side in his last moments.

The family will receive those wishing to pay their respects at the John F. Tierney Funeral Home, 219 West Center Street in Manchester, from 5 p.m.-7 p.m. on Friday, January 12, 2024. A celebration of life will be held on Saturday, January 13, 2024, at 10:00 a.m. at the funeral home. Burial will immediately follow at Hillstown Road Veterans Cemetery, 180 Hillstown Road, Manchester, CT. For online condolences, please visit [www.tierneyfuneralhome.com](http://www.tierneyfuneralhome.com).

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**Create an enduring memorial for a loved one**

Memorials come in many different shapes and sizes. Here is just one way to create an enduring memorial.

**Create a memorial garden.** Speak with an area park ranger to determine if you can donate an engraved sitting bench or construct a tranquil garden space in a loved one's name.

## Life Tributes

### Lucy Shea Sweeney 1942 - 2024



She enjoyed her career as a classroom teacher and later as a reading specialist in the Manchester, Andover, and Orange (CT) school districts.

Family and friends may call on the John F. Tierney Funeral Home, 219 W. Center St., Manchester, on Thursday, January 11th, from 2-4 p.m. and 6-8 p.m. A Mass of Christian Burial will be held on Friday, January 12th, at St. Bartholomew Church, 736 Middle Turnpike E, Manchester, at 10:30 a.m. Burial to follow at St. James Cemetery.

For online condolences, please visit [www.tierneyfuneralhome.com](http://www.tierneyfuneralhome.com).



ADVERTORIAL

### Memorial gifts honor loved ones create a charitable foundation

Those who have the time and resources can establish their own charitable groups in the decedent's name. This method of charity requires the most time and effort, but can prove to be quite an impactful memorial. Individuals who would like to go this route can consult with financial and tax professionals about the best way to establish a charitable group.

Loss of a friend or loved one is seldom easy, particularly if a loved one had been suffering from an illness. Close friends and family cherish the memories of their deceased loved ones in different ways. Charitable giving can be a great way to honor a loved one's life while helping others.

Survivors often find comfort in the knowledge that they can do something in the name of a loved one. Tributes or memorial gifts can be established in different ways and serve as an ongoing reminder of a loved one.

### William Joseph Walker

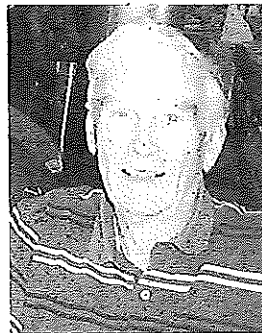
William Joseph Walker, 87, formerly of Somers, CT, passed peacefully on January 4, 2024, at his daughters home in Brattleboro, VT surrounded by his family.

Bill was born on February 28, 1936 in Melrose, MA to George and Mary Agnes (Cronin) Walker.

Bill spent three years in Germany with the US Army during the Korean conflict as a Military Police Officer. After his service, Bill attended Merrimack College and earned his degree in Business Administration. He began his career as a buyer with Pratt and Whitney and then eventually went into sales. He worked for National Starch and Chemical for 32 years selling industrial adhesives. During his career for National Starch and Chemical he was named Salesman Of The Year several times.

Bill enjoyed downhill skiing and raised a family of skiers, spending weekends and holidays in his Vermont home near Okemo Mountain. His children and his grandchildren share his love of skiing. Bill and Claire also enjoyed spending summers in their home on Deer Isle, Maine. They enjoyed hikes on the island, sea kayaking, golfing, and eating lobster. Bill had a deep love of family and enjoyed getting together for "Walker Days" with his siblings, nieces and nephews over the years.

Bill was predeceased by his brothers George and Robert Walker, and his sister Dorothy Walker (Riley). His sister, Mary Walker Currier, passed away



the same day approximately twelve hours after her big brother Billy. We take comfort that they went into the next life together.

He is survived by his wife of 60 years, Claire Pettee Walker, his daughter Gail Walker Babbitt (Joseph), his son James Walker, daughter Susan Walker Hutton (Thomas) and John Walker (Erin Evans) and his brother Donald Walker. In addition he leaves seven grandchildren, two great-grandchildren and several nieces and nephews. And lastly, he leaves his beloved dog, Pandi, who was always by his side and with him until the end.

When Bill was asked what he would want included in his obituary he said "I have lived a great life in my almost 88 years and am proud of my children." In lieu of flowers he has requested donations be made to St. Jude, Shriners, or ASPCA; organizations that he has sponsored during his life.

At this time, no funeral services will be held. Bill's family will hold a private celebration of life at a later date.

ADVERTORIAL

### Create an enduring memorial for a loved one

Memorials come in many different shapes and sizes. Here is just one way to create an enduring memorial.

**Create a scholarship fund.** What better way to honor a loved one's memory than to create an avenue to help others in his or her name? Scholarship funds are an ideal way to honor a deceased loved one. Work with the deceased person's alma mater to establish a scholarship at that school.

## No charges to be filed in death of toddler

### Fell in cistern in Vermont in July

ASSOCIATED PRESS

CAMBRIDGE, Vt. — No criminal charges will be filed in the death of a 3-year-old boy who fell into an underground cistern and was seriously injured in July while attending a day care program at Smugglers' Notch Resort, Vermont State Police said Tuesday.

Police said they have completed their investigation into the death of Tate Holtzman, of Cambridge, who died days later at the University of Vermont Medical Center.

The toddler was walking with adult supervision near the outdoor splash pad when he stepped on an unsecured cover to the cistern, which gave way, police said. Teenage lifeguards on duty at the nearby pools made multiple entries into the tank to locate him "at extraordinary personal risk in a heroic attempt to save Tate's life," state police said in a news release.

State police gave the findings of their investigation to the Lamoille County state's attorney, which determined that no criminal charges will be filed, police said. The Vermont Occupational Safety and Health Administration and the Vermont Department for Children and Families, which oversees licensed day care providers, have been doing their own reviews of the incident, police said.

The Department for Children and Families' licensing unit did a thorough investigation and has not issued violations of child care licensing regulations related to this case, Deputy Commissioner Janet McLaughlin said in a statement.