

Beattyville in shock from destruction in 'worst tragedy'

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BEATTYVILLE, Ky. — Christine Lyons watched solemnly yesterday afternoon as the bulldozers scooped a block of her town into dump trucks.

As she stood across the street, the trucks hauled load after load of rubble away from the beauty shop where she often had her hair fixed and from the restaurant next door where she sometimes ate.

Those businesses and others at the intersection of KY 11 and KY 52 in Beattyville, were demolished Saturday morning when a gasoline truck crashed into them, engulfing the area in flames.

By the time the blaze was brought under control, a full city block had been destroyed.

Seven bodies were found in the rubble.

"It makes you feel awful," Mrs. Lyons said. "It's a sad day. This is the worst tragedy that's ever hit Beattyville."

Mrs. Lyons was among the scores of Beattyville's 1,500 or so residents who stood on roped-off curbs at the intersection, watching workmen and fire officials probe the ruins.

Hundreds of others — many with out-of-county license plates on their cars — drove bumper-to-bumper through the town, 22 miles south of Natural Bridge State Park. City and state police directed the steady stream of traffic.

"It's the awfulest thing that ever happened," said Mable Barrett, who has lived all her life in Beattyville, the Lee County seat. "We're all tore up."

Like many of those interviewed yesterday, Mrs. Barrett knew most of those killed in the blaze.

Mayor Charles Beach III, who met with local and state officials along the debris-strewn streets all day, said he thought most of the townspeople were still in shock.

"A lot of people haven't even been to bed yet," he said.

On Saturday hundreds of residents helped with the search for bodies, which lasted until long after the seventh, and officials believe the last, victim was found about 12:30 a.m.

Beach estimated that the major cleanup work would be finished by late last night.

One of the state officials who flew to Beattyville yesterday was Gov. Julian Carroll, who said the state will build a new section of KY 11 to bypass the steep hill leading into town.

The gasoline truck was entering Beattyville on KY 11 when its brakes failed, according to driver William Wilson, causing the truck to speed down the hill out of control and to slam into the block of businesses. Wilson escaped with burns on his left hand and shoulder.

The truck's cargo of 8,200 gallons of gasoline poured out onto the street, causing what witnesses described as a wall of flames to rush along a couple of blocks of Main Street, KY 52.

Carroll said the first section of the new road will run five miles north from Beattyville's business district.

Plans for the new stretch of road call for traffic to be rerouted off the hill and into town by way of a more gentle incline to the west.

He said the state highway department is evaluating the information it received at a hearing on the corridor about a month ago. The preliminary funding for engineering already has been authorized, he said.

"It's just a question of where and how it will be built," Carroll said. "The tragedy is that it's something that should have been initiated and completed years ago."

Beattyville residents say they have been trying for about 15 years to get the state to eliminate the hazardous stretch of highway.

As state fire officials continued to sift through the charred remains of the buildings yesterday, Rodney Raby, field supervisor of the hazardous materials section of the state fire marshal's office, said his men are charged with investigating all accidents involving such materials.

The gasoline truck, owned by Usher Transport, Inc., of Louisville, was

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Staff Photo by Keith Williams

Workers in Beattyville continue to clean up the rubble left in the wake of a gasoline tanker explosion

and fire that demolished many businesses along the town's Main Street Saturday.

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