

# Cause of Shelton fire undetermined

By Michael P. Mayko

SHELTON — For five days, a crew of investigators dug, scooped and hoed.

But despite that long, dirty work, their efforts were fruitless.

“I don’t think we will ever determine the cause,” Fire Marshal James Tortora said of the Jan. 6 blaze that destroyed 434 Howe Ave. “The collapse and the damage it caused made everything too difficult and unsafe.”

Tortora said he, his deputy, five members of the state fire marshal’s office and insurance investigators spent five days sifting through the debris.

They determined the blaze started in the basement, somewhere between Howe Convenient and Dollar Chest — two street-level stores.

Tortora said the crew cleared some of the debris, but could not get into the basement.

“The building collapsed onto itself,” he said. “That made everything impossible.”

He said no evidence was sent to the state for further examination.

Now all that remains is to clear the site.

“We are waiting for the insurance investigators,” Tortora said. “The go-ahead to clear, he said, might come by the end of the week.”

Once there is sufficient access, the city’s building inspector will look at the adjoining structure, which contained Liquid Lunch and Joy Lee Chinese restaurant. That building was damaged not by fire, but by the smoke, water and falling

debris.

The fire left 27 families homeless and destroyed all their belongings in the former Kreiger building, which was built in 1880.

The Echo Hose Fire Department on Coram Avenue has been collecting gift cards and clothing while Team, Inc., in Derby, has been looking for one- and two-bedroom apartments in the Naugatuck Valley in which to house the victims.

Additionally, Team is seeking household furnishings which the residents will need for their new apartments. These include small kitchen appliances like microwaves, as well as beds, tables and chairs, lamps and housewares. Items can be brought to Conti Storage Door 7 on West Canal Street.

Team also is looking for volunteers with trucks who can help pick up donated items.

Oxford Academy of Hair Design will conduct a cut-a-thon to benefit the displaced families on Thursday, from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., at their school on 153 North Street, Seymour. Haircuts will be \$10 for children and men, and \$15 for women.

In addition to having their hair cut, the public may bring donations of non-perishable food items, adult clothing, blankets, toiletries, and gift cards for grocery and departments stores which are to go to the victims.

For more information on the cut-a-thon, call Kelly Steeves at the academy, 203-888-0097, ext. 1. For information on Team’s needs, call 203-736-5420.