



Witnesses saw flames on plane before fatal crash

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Methuen Fire Lieutenant Jeff Sirois removed the tarp covering the plane.

By [Andy Rosen](#) and [Matt Rocheleau](#)

GLOBE STAFF MARCH 01, 2017

METHUEN — Two witnesses reported seeing flames coming from a small plane just before it crashed into a condominium complex, according to recordings of 911 calls released Wednesday.

Authorities released the recordings as federal investigators pulled the wreckage of the self-built plane from the roof of a building in the Pride's Crossing development here. The pilot, 73-year-old Alan Lavender, was killed in Tuesday's crash.

Aaron McCarter, who is investigating the crash for the National Transportation Safety Board, said reports indicated that the plane “took a steep descent and disappeared behind the trees” as it approached Lawrence Municipal Airport.

Investigators are reaching out to witnesses to corroborate the accounts of flames, but they would look broadly at the “man, the machine, and the environment” as potential causes, he said.



Witnesses saw flames on plane before fatal crash

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Nils Carlson of Newbury said he called authorities after seeing the plane show signs of distress. He was driving north on Interstate 495 when he saw the plane appear to make an abrupt movement and pitched downward, he said. As he drove toward the plane, he saw smoke and what appeared to be fire.



Friend says experimental aircraft was pilot's passion

Bob Di Meo said he advised Alan Lavender through the process of building his own plane, and is unsure why the aircraft crashed.

Photos from the plane crash

When he saw the plane disappear behind the trees, his heart sank, he said.

"I knew that probably something terrible had happened," he said.

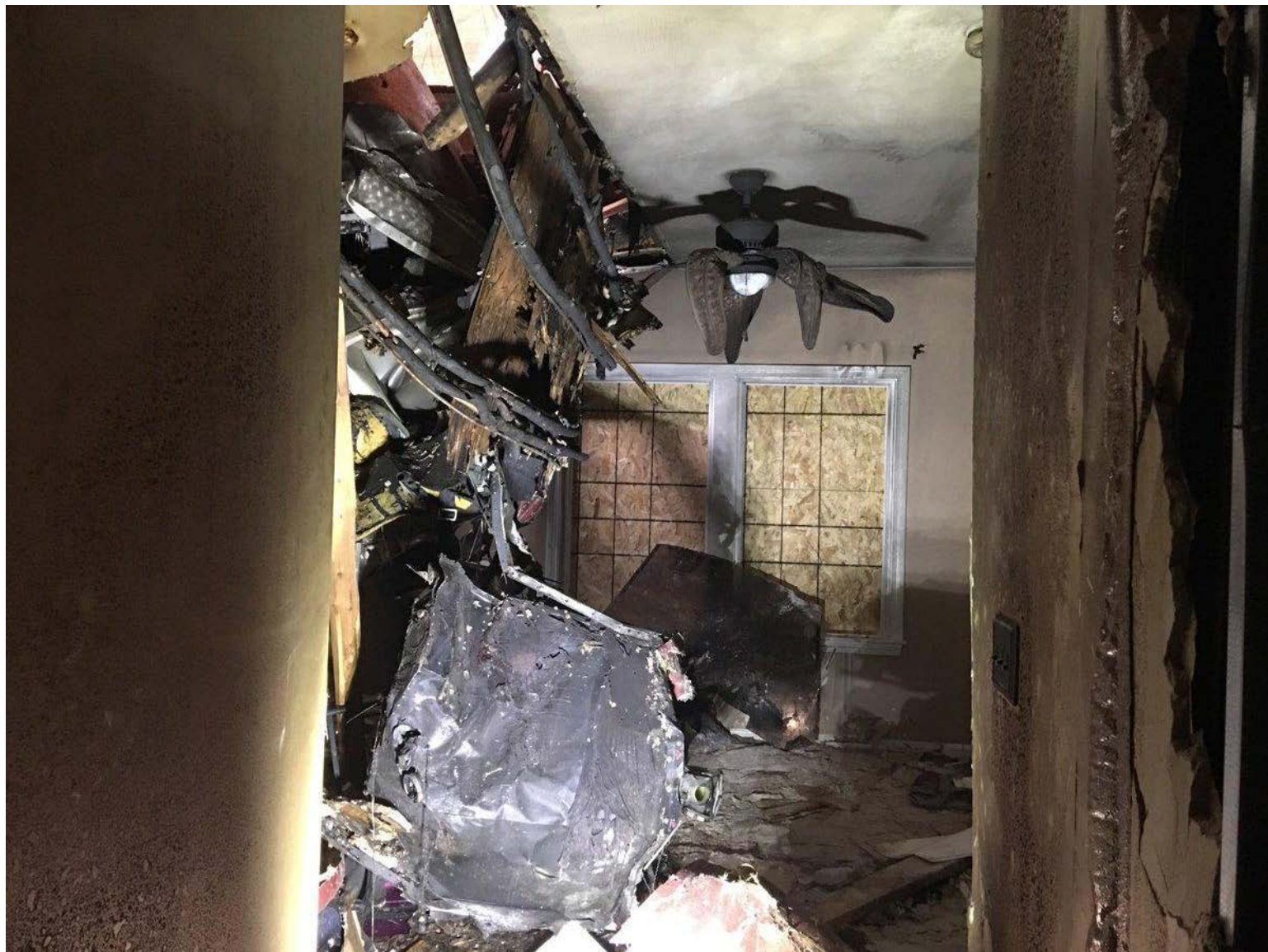
Another witness told Methuen police that the plane "started catching on fire" before it went down.

McCarter said investigators are looking for additional eyewitness accounts, including photos or video of the crash. People with information can e-mail witness@ntsb.gov, he said.

Investigators are also looking into Lavender's experience and training; the Sonex aircraft, including the performance of its Australian-made Jabiru engine; and the air conditions.

An advertisement for TicketWatch. It features a photograph of a theater stage with red curtains and a bright light source behind them. The text "The box office in your inbox." is written in yellow. Below it, "Save on local events." is written in white. A red button with the text "Sign up" is positioned below that. At the bottom, the text "boston.com | TicketWatch" is displayed in white.

Lavender had been flying in the area before the crash, McCarter said. Self-built planes like Lavender's are common, although statistics show they are involved in more accidents than other aircraft.



METHUEN POLICE

In a 2012 study, the Federal Aviation Administration found that between 2001 and 2010, amateur-built aircraft consistently had significantly higher rates of accidents — fatal and nonfatal — than other aircraft.

The rate declines as pilots become more experienced with the plane, and those involved in the field say self-built planes are becoming safer.

Bob Di Meo, who said he advised Lavender through the process of building his plane, said he isn't sure what might have caused the crash.

Lavender, a former mayor of Newburyport, had flown the plane for nearly a year after taking it for an inaugural flight last May, Di Meo said.

“He built a nice airplane,” Di Meo said. “There wasn’t anything weird about how he built the aircraft.”

The Sonex plane Lavender built is “a good aircraft,” Di Meo said.

“There’s hundreds of them flying,” said Di Meo, who flies an aircraft he built himself about 12 years ago.

Lavender served as mayor in Newburyport from 2002 to 2003 and was known as a pillar of the community. In a statement, the Lavender family expressed its “deepest gratitude for the outpouring of support we have received from our friends and neighbors in Newburyport since the tragic loss of our beloved Al on Tuesday.”

“Al dedicated his life to his community,” the family wrote.

On Wednesday afternoon, residents of Pride’s Crossing, a well-groomed cluster of yellow, multiunit buildings along the Merrimack River, gathered outside as crews prepared to pull the plane from the roof and haul it away on a trailer for examination.

No one who lived in the building was hurt, but residents might not be able to return home for weeks or months.

For much of the day, the plane had been covered by a tarp before a crane arrived to pull it, inch by inch, from the hole it had pierced in the roof. It was a painstaking process, and neighbors, relief workers, and even police pulled out their phones to document it. But when the smashed aircraft finally emerged, the mood turned somber. Many people set down their phones, their eyes glistening.

Ellen Sullivan of Somerville, a Red Cross volunteer who had worked at the scene for two days, said the finality of the scene was poignant.

“It just felt like a moment of reckoning,” she said. As she imagined how Lavender would have been planning to come home to his family after his flight, her voice broke.

“It just felt like, when the plane came out, that he deserved that moment,” she said.



JOHN BLANDING/GLOBE STAFF

Workers secured the plane on a flatbed truck after it was removed from the roof.



JOHN BLANDING/GLOBE STAFF

The airplane involved in the fatal crash was lowered onto a flatbed truck.

John R. Ellement of the Globe staff contributed to this report. Andy Rosen can be reached at andrew.rosen@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter at [@andyrosen](https://twitter.com/andyrosen). Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](https://twitter.com/mrochele).

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Dick Albert, former Channel 5 weatherman, dies

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Daniel Redmond, one of four Teamsters on trial, posted an article on the Facebook page, “Support the Teamster 4,” violating a court order to not speak publicly about the case. [MORE...](#)



Thousands of cyclists are pedaling during the 38th Pan-Mass Challenge

More than 5,300 cyclists took off Saturday morning in the 2017 Pan-Mass Challenge, raising money for patient care and cancer research. [MORE...](#)



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Some people redeem so many winning tickets that they raise questions about the integrity and oversight of the \$5 billion state lottery. [MORE...](#)

Police disperse hundreds of youths in the North End

State Police spokesman David Procopio said Boston police requested Massachusetts State Police assistance with dispersing between 500 and 1,000 youths. [MORE...](#)



A cross-country bicycle trip of a lifetime — delayed 40 years

John Sweeney averaged 65 miles a day, mostly along Route 20, a 3,365-mile ribbon of asphalt that is the longest road in the United States. [MORE...](#)



State Police investigate video of youths fighting on pier in Quincy

A video of youths being punched and kicked is making the rounds on social media. [MORE...](#)



Cambridge city councilor to leave politics

Cambridge city councilor Leland Cheung, the first Asian-American on the council, announced this week that he intends to leave politics. [MORE...](#)



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You might want to just stay home this weekend. [MORE...](#)



Michelle Carter receives 15 months in jail; will remain free pending appeal

A judge sentenced Michelle Carter to two and a half years, with 15 months to serve and 15 months probation, for goading her boyfriend to kill himself in a high-profile texting suicide case. However, he allowed Carter to remain free while awaiting appeal. [MORE...](#)



'Dukes of Hazzard' actor arrested in Waltham

Tom Wopat was arraigned on a charge of groping a woman who was to share the stage with him in a local production of "42nd Street." [MORE...](#)

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