



## Copper theft could have been deadly

By Rick Pfeiffer

NIAGARA GAZETTE (NIAGARA FALLS, N.Y.)

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It sounded like a water leak, but what was happening in the basement of a popular tavern on a busy Saturday night could have ended in tragedy.

Someone broke into 437 Third St., which houses Third Street Liquors and the Tap Room tavern, and cut both the water and natural gas lines in the basement in an attempt to steal the copper connecting pipe. The result was a basement full of water and explosive natural gas.

“Whoever did this is extremely lucky they didn’t kill themselves and others,” Niagara Falls Fire Chief William MacKay said.

A Tap Room manager contacted the building owner around 10 p.m. Saturday to report he’d been hearing running water somewhere in the structure since early afternoon. When an employee of the building manager arrived to check on the noise, he discovered a rear door was open.

In a police report filed late Sunday morning, the building manager told an officer his employee discovered the water and gas pipes cut and found the basement “full of gas, with water on the floor.” As the employee made that discovery, the Tap Room was filled with Saturday night partiers.

The employee turned off both the gas and water and left. MacKay said that was probably not the best way to handle the situation.

“Natural gas is both explosive and toxic,” the fire chief said. “We certainly don’t recommend entering the building. They should have evacuated and called us ... ”

Mayor Paul Dyster said the city cannot tolerate the potential for a deadly explosion from the actions of copper thieves.

“We’re going to war against these copper thieves before (their actions) kill our kids,” Dyster said. “If you get caught stealing copper, there is going to be the devil to pay.”

Copper thefts have become an international plague, with widespread thefts in the United States, train travel disruptions in Australia and a suspicion that multimillion-dollar thefts are fueled at least in part by a construction boom in China, possibly even the stadium to house Olympics events, reports Reuters.

Rick Pfeiffer writes for Niagara Gazette in Niagara Falls, N.Y.

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