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Bank fire stirs fears of PCBs

By Phillip J. O'Connor and Hanka Gratteau

Tests were being conducted Wednesday night to determine if the First National Bank of Chicago would be allowed to reopen its Loop headquarters after a fire in an electrical transformer raised the possibility of toxic contamination.

However, spokesmen for the Fire Department, Commonwealth Edison Co. and the bank said it appeared that no highly toxic PCBs were burned in the fire, three floors below street level near One First National Plaza at Clark

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Fire and police officials and Commonwealth Edison workers gather Wednesday outside First National Bank of Chicago, two floors above the site of an electrical transformer fire that sent workers into the street and tied up Loop traffic. Right: An injured firefighter is rushed to an ambulance. (Sun-Times Photos by Dom Najolia and Jim Klepitsch)

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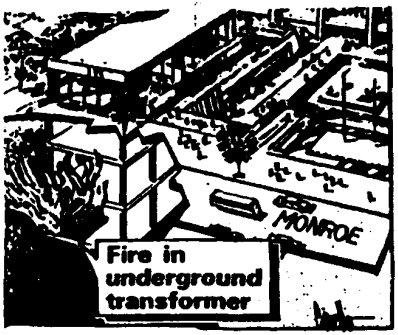
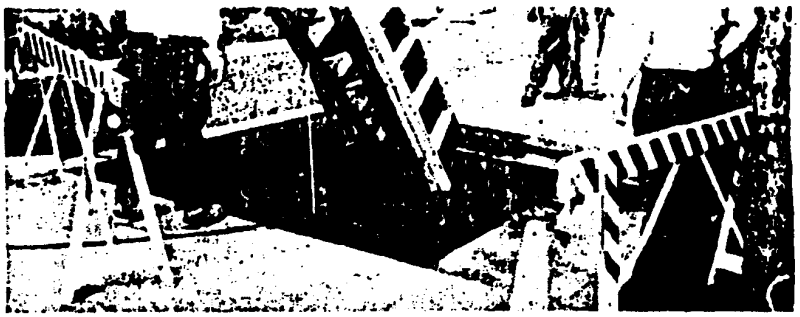


Sun-Times Graphic by Tom Carello



After a fire in an electrical transformer earlier in the day, Commonwealth Edison workers lower ladders to the site Wednesday from the sidewalk outside First National Bank. (Sun-Times Photo by Dom Najolia)

BLAZE: Bank set to reopen if tests for PCB are favorable

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and Monroe. Barbara Arnold, a Commonwealth Edison spokesman, said a preliminary evaluation showed little indication of PCB contamination. If test results, which are expected to be completed Thursday morning, are acceptable, the bank will be opened for business as usual, officials said.

When PCBs—polychlorinated biphenyls—burn, they create dioxin, one of the most toxic chemicals.

Ten people, including five firefighters, were injured—none seriously—in the blaze, three floors below street level of One First National Plaza, which sent thousands of workers from the 57-story building that is the headquarters of the First National Bank of Chicago into the street, tying up Loop traffic.

John Muraro, a spokesman for the state Environmental Protection Agency, said Edison had taken samples of soot and air with a "scanner" on every fifth floor of the building to see if PCBs were present.

Arnold said that while traces of PCB were found in a spill of oil from the 10,000-pound transformer, there were no signs that the oil itself burned, emitting PCBs.

John Hogan, another Edison spokesman, said 15 of the 200 gallons of liquid in the transformer had spilled out during the fire but "had not been consumed by fire. There was no PCB-related smoke involved."

Hogan said there were no air ducts in the vault that contained the transformer; so smoke did not get into the building's heating and air-conditioning system. He said smoke seen coming from air ducts in the main bank building during the fire was from a diesel engine.

However, if the tests turn up evidence of PCBs, Muraro said, "we will go back over the building with much more thorough sampling." That would result in closing the building for three to five days or longer, he said.

The PCBs were in a liquid used as a coolant in the transformer.

Lt. Dennis McGuire, a Fire Department spokesman, said firefighters wearing breathing masks and protective clothing used dry chemicals to put out the fire within five minutes, and then noticed liquid on the floor.

Edison officials were notified, and Fire Commissioner Louis T. Galante, Police Supt.-designate Fred Rice, city Public Safety Director Samuel W. Nolan and other officials went to the scene to assess the emergency.

After the fire was out, some 50 firefighters went to 1st District fire headquarters, at Illinois and Dearborn, where their clothing was placed in plastic bags and they took showers as a precaution against PCB contamination.

Firefighters Lakewood Cross, 30, and Richard Kelly, 55, suffered smoke inhalation and were admitted to Northwestern Memorial Hospital in fair condition.

Five people who were identified by a bank spokesman as employees in the bank's underground garage were treated in Northwestern and released. They are Benjamin Bruie, 22, of 3515 W. 130th, Robbins; Donie Arnold, 29, of 10751 S. Rhodes; Richard Deitche, 22, of 5747 S. Francisco; Anthony Seykes, 32, of 4213 W. 107th Pl., and Bette Gerstelman, 32, address unavailable.

Admitted to Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical Center were firefighters William O'Boyle, 41, and James Laughney, 35. Firefighter Myron Kovalevych, 34, was admitted to Mercy Hospital. All were listed in good condition after treatment for smoke inhalation.

The fire knocked out power in parts of the building. Hogan said Edison hoped to have the power restored by Thursday morning. Two of the four transformers in the underground vault were damaged. Hogan said two transformers could supply enough power for the entire building on a temporary basis.

Hogan said Edison has been phasing out its use of insulating fluid that contains PCBs as it renovates transformers. Because this particular transformer had been working properly, he said, there was no reason to take it out of service.

He said there are 2,300 transformers containing PCBs in Chicago, 1,900 of them in the Loop.

A crane was brought in from Edison's Maywood yards to remove a sidewall slab at Monroe and Dearborn to vent the underground area and make it possible to remove the fire-damaged transformer.

Nick's Fishmarket in the bank plaza area sent out tuxedoed bartenders to pour soft drinks for firefighters. Restaurant manager Aaron Placurakis said the restaurant had to cancel 350 dinner reservations.

Workers in the bank building said they first became aware something was wrong when lights started flashing off and elevators and escalators ceased to function.

Pat Wingert, Thomas Maier and Donna Gianola contributed to this story.

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