

Officials: School blaze was arson

By Neil Vigdor

Staff Writer, Greenwich Time

©2005 Southern CT Newspapers, Inc.

Arson has been ruled the cause of a fire that gutted a two-story, wood-frame office building last week at the Greenwich Japanese School.

Deputy Fire Chief and Marshal Joseph Benoit Jr. confirmed yesterday that the town has launched a criminal investigation into the blaze, which was reported around 10:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Lake Avenue campus.

"The fire appears to be arson," Benoit said. "It's still under investigation. We do not have anyone responsible for it yet." No one was injured in the fire. Benoit explained that several factors led to the conclusion that the fire was intentionally set, including physical evidence recovered from the scene and "the fact that it was well established when (we) got the call."

The fire began on the first floor he said but, because of the pending investigation, would not go into further detail on the physical evidence or an earlier report that a door to the building was found open. Investigators declared the area a crime scene Saturday and enlisted the help of police detectives in their search for the arsonist.

Police Detective Edward Zack, one of the investigators on the case, confirmed that he had requested an English translation of an item written for a Japanese newspaper, New York Seikatsu Press, describing contentiousness at the school over negotiations for its sale.

The Westchester/Fairfield Hebrew Academy is looking to relocate from its temporary home at Greenwich's Temple Shalom. The sale would mean a loss of \$4.5 million for the Greenwich Japanese School on the property, according to the item.

"Somebody brought it to our attention last week," Zack said. "It's input into the investigation."

School officials could not be reached for comment yesterday. Benoit said he informed them of his findings over the weekend.

"They were quite surprised," he said.

Built as a single-family home in 1920, the building destroyed by last week's fire housed two offices and a kitchen on its first floor and a vacant, one-bedroom apartment on the second floor.

Greenwich Japanese School serves about 240 children in first through ninth grades. The institution has followed Japan's national curriculum since its founding in 1992.

The building was being used as the office for the Japanese Educational Institute of New York, which oversees the Greenwich Japanese School and other Japanese educational programs in the tri-state area.
Reprinted with permission.