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Downtown Pueblo Restaurant Explodes; 1 Killed

By Howard Pankratz, Denver Post

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A massive explosion in downtown Pueblo at 2:20 p.m. demolished two buildings, killing one person and injuring about a half-dozen more.

Woody Percival, spokesman for the Pueblo Fire Department, said the explosion at the Branch Inn, 301 S. Union Ave., trapped five people in the restaurant and two others in the Classic Boutique, immediately to the west.

Michelle Peulen, spokeswoman for Parkview Hospital in Pueblo, said six people were treated at Parkview with injuries ranging from serious crush injuries to minor lacerations. She confirmed that one of the patients had died.

The first patients arrived at Parkview about 2:45 p.m.

Rochelle DeVargas, spokeswoman for St. Mary-Corwin hospital, said one victim is being treated there. She was identified as Sarah Salazar, 30, and is in fair condition, said DeVargas.

At 6:30 p.m., following several hours of effort, Percival said that rescuers reached an elderly man in the basement of the demolished Branch Inn. He was brought out on a stretcher - handed from one rescuer to another, said the spokesman. About 26 people helped rescue the man.

Percival said searchers will comb the rest of the basement this evening searching for more victims.

Michael Pacheco, owner of Papa Jose's Union Cafe, 320 S. Union Ave., said the explosion was accompanied by a boom and shock wave that he thought moved his restaurant off its foundations.

"It looked like a war zone with a big mushroom cloud above the Branch Inn," said Pacheco. "It looked like pictures of 9/11."

Pacheco said that as he raced down the street toward the Branch Inn, there was debris and dirt floating down from the sky.

He said the first thing he saw was a man covered with soot who had been blown in the street. He said he didn't see the man at first because of the soot.

As he got to the demolished building, he said a soot-covered man stood up in the middle of the ruins, and hollered, "There was a gas leak.

"He crawled out of the rubble and got half way into the street and collapsed," said Pacheco.

Pacheco said that at that point he directed his attention the Classic Boutique where he saw a young man digging through the rubble.

"He said there was a girl buried there and she thought there had been three people in the shop," said Pacheco.

Peulen of Parkview Hospital, said that after the explosion, the hospital was placed on "ER alert," meaning the staff on duty was kept there and that more staffers were alerted that they might be needed.

Percival said the four people in the Branch Inn, who rescuers reached first, were conscious and able to speak as they were loaded into ambulances. He said a fifth person, who had been in the Classic Boutique, was rescued and taken to a hospital.

A sixth person, who was in the Classic Boutique, was trapped under debris for about two hours before being rescued. Percival said that woman appeared to be in much worse condition than the others.

The explosion occurred in Pueblo's historic district, which is full of restaurants and boutiques, said Percival. He said the explosion occurred one block south of the spot where Barack Obama spoke on Nov. 1 before about 15,000 people.

The initial rescue and firefighting efforts were hampered by a large debris field, flames and smoke in the restaurant, and the possibility that what remains of the roof above the second building may collapse on rescuers, said Percival.

The restaurant, which sits on a corner, exploded with tremendous force, sending debris flying 80 feet across Union Avenue into buildings across the street, said the fire department spokesman.

Pacheco said that the front door of the Branch Inn was blown across the street and hit a car stopped at a stop sign. The people inside the car were not hurt, said Pacheco.

Percival said fire engines had to cross the rubble to reach the collapsed structures.

Five engine companies, an aerial ladder company and many ambulances were at the scene, said Percival. Also at the scene was a heavy rescue truck from Fort Carson, whose crew specializes in rescuing victims from collapsed structures.

Percival, a fire inspector, said: "At this point, we have no idea what caused the explosion, but it is consistent with a natural-gas explosion."

He said members of the Colorado Bureau of Investigation arrived at about 4:45 p.m., and members of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives are expected this evening. The CBI has a "flammable substance detection canine" on scene, said Percival.

He said that given the size and impact of the explosion, fire investigators want to utilize both the resources of the ATF and CBI.

Pacheco said that the Branch Inn was a Pueblo institution and had a beautiful Art Deco bar.

"The Branch Inn has an old and colorful history," said Pacheco. He said that according to Pueblo folklore there was a tunnel underneath Pueblo that led to the Branch Inn where booze was smuggled into the bar during Prohibition.

Pacheco added that the explosion has had a devastating impact on the business people of the neighborhood.

"The general reaction is that we are devastated," said Pacheco. "We are a close-knit business community. If we have problems we work things out together."

As far as his own thoughts at seeing the explosion, Pacheco said:

"It was just a devastating scene. I couldn't imagine this happening. I was in a state of shock."