

August 24, 2001
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BOY, 8, CRUSHED TO DEATH BY ELEVATOR

From staff reports

An 8-year-old boy died Thursday when he was crushed in a hotel elevator in Bethel while his twin sister waited in the lobby nearby.

Joseph Smith of Bel Air, Md., was wedged in the 5-inch gap between an exterior door and the metal folding gate of the Bethel Inn's 1920 elevator. The boy was stuck there when the elevator began to rise, squeezing him into the top of the door frame. He was pronounced dead at the scene.

State police detectives were called in to investigate the case, but determined that no charges should be filed, said Department of Public Safety spokesman Stephen McCausland.

The elevator failed an inspection June 8, but state officials said none of the deficiencies was related to the accident and none threatened passenger safety.

The children were staying in the western Maine resort town with their parents, Jeffrey and Mary Smith.

The boy's father had taken the children down to the lobby of the elegant two-story inn at 8:30 a.m. to have breakfast, McCausland said.

The father had to return to the family's room momentarily to retrieve something and left the twins in the lobby.

While he was gone, Joseph Smith got inside the elevator's exterior door but not into the car itself.

The elevator is called a swing-gate car elevator and, although it is more than 80 years old, it does not by its design pose a safety hazard, state officials said. Often such elevators will not move unless the metal accordion-like grate enclosing the car is shut.

It is unclear how the exterior door came to be closed, McCausland said. There is no indication other adults were present in that area at the time, he said.

While the boy was inside, a maid upstairs pushed a button to summon the elevator.

The elevator had been inspected and found deficient in 10 areas, said Kristine Ossenfort, assistant to the commissioner in the Department of Professional and Financial Regulation.

"It doesn't appear any of these violations would have impacted that incident," she said.

The department oversees inspections for all 2,900 passenger elevators in the state once a year. If an elevator is found to have serious safety problems, an inspector has the authority to order it closed. That was not the case here, Ossenfort said.

Inspectors use a checklist of 80 items covering the car itself, the machine room, the top of the car and the pit.

If the inspection reveals deficiencies that do not pose an immediate risk to the public, the owner is given six weeks to correct them. In this case, the report was issued July 19.

The report called for changes in the machine-room door and drain, alterations on top of the car and additional lighting and communication.

It is unclear whether the inn made any of the modifications required.

A state inspector is working with state police to determine exactly what happened and whether any malfunction was involved, said Anne Head, director of the Office of Licensing and Registration.

"The task for (the inspector) and state police is to reconstruct the circumstances to see exactly what happened. We don't really know at this point what may have contributed to it," she said.

Head said no elevator-related deaths or accidents have been reported to her agency since she became director in 1996.