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Hazmat crews called to Chapel Hill apartments

Katie Jansen

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Entryways to apartment buildings at PineGate Apartments were blocked off by caution tape after emergency crews responded to a strong chemical odor. Notices had been posted warning residents that the chemical was slippery. (The Herald-Sun/Katie Jansen)

Residents watched Wednesday from their apartment balconies as firefighters, police and hazmat teams worked behind caution tape to clean up a chemical that burned at least one person and two dogs at a Chapel Hill apartment complex.

The chemical was laid down by a private contractor and affected 11 buildings in PineGate Apartments off Eastowne Drive, according to the town of Chapel Hill.

PineGate Apartments is one of GSC's four Chapel Hill properties. The company owns 17 other properties in the Triangle.



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The Chapel Hill Fire Department responded to reports of a strong chemical odor Wednesday at around 7:36 a.m. They found an unidentified chemical on apartment stairwells and floors. The department called the Regional Response Hazmat Team to help.

Officials from five agencies were on scene to help with the investigation and provide services.

Zaryab Hassan, who has lived in the complex for about seven years, said that the complex distributed a notice Monday night that said a contractor was scheduled to power wash and stain the apartment breezeways Tuesday morning.

The notice, issued by PineGate management, said that Raleigh-based Professional Property Enhancement would use "heavy duty cleaning products" and that the cleaning would be a three-to four-day process.

Notices were also posted on apartment entryways, warning residents to exercise caution and absolving PPE of liability in the event of an accident.

Hassan said he was at the apartment's pool with his fiancée, Jessica Stallings, on Tuesday. When they returned around noon, the chemical had already been laid down.

Hassan, who lives in a second-floor unit, described the chemical as white and very slippery.

"We had to hold the walls, hold the fire extinguisher, to get to our door," he said.

The couple waited until the evening to walk their two dogs. But by about 5 p.m., the chemical still hadn't been cleared away, Hassan said.

Hassan said he called the apartment office to ask how to take his dogs outside. He said the property manager told him to cover the dogs' feet with plastic bags.

Hassan did so, but he said the surface was so slippery that one of his dogs, a 3-year-old boxer named Hazel, fell on her face.

Hazel got some of the chemical on her nose and licked it off.

As the night went on, they noticed Hazel becoming more sluggish.

She was even worse Wednesday morning. She stopped drinking water and Hassan saw a soapy substance on the inside of her cheeks.

Hassan knew he had to get her to the vet. By that time, police were on scene, telling residents they had to either leave their homes or stay inside.

Hassan chose to leave, carrying Hazel downstairs in his arms. He found out that the chemical had caused Hazel's tongue to burn and her throat to swell. Fur was also missing from her legs where the chemical had made contact.

As firefighters and hazmat crews patrolled the scene, Hassan stayed outside with Hazel, unable to return to his apartment. Stallings threw down water bottles for them to stay cool.

But no one knew when the chemical would be cleared. By about 1:30 p.m., the chemical was still there. Police officers and firefighters were turning people away from the scene.

"I wouldn't breathe too much of that in," a firefighter said.

Other residents have had close calls with the chemical within the past couple of days.

A woman named Ursula, who declined to give her last name, said she went to the apartment office and asked the property manager whether the chemical was toxic. She, too, was worried about her dog.

Ursula, who has lived at PineGate for about twelve years, said the property manager called someone but didn't communicate any details of the call to her.

She said she laid down cardboard boxes to be safe before taking her dog out, but she got a little bit of the chemical on her leg and felt it start burning immediately.

By 3:15 p.m. Wednesday, the town of Chapel Hill had issued a statement that said PineGate management would arrange for evacuation and clean-up. The town said the chemical was laid about 4 p.m. Tuesday and advised anyone who came in contact with it to contact management immediately.

Jay Haselden, president of PPE, said the chemical is called "stripper cream" and was being used to remove a concrete sealer from PineGate's breezeways.

"It's as safe as it gets when it comes to removing chemicals," he said.

He explained the process, saying that the stripper cream must sit for 24 hours before it is power washed off.



Haselden said he told the PineGate property manager that dogs shouldn't walk on the chemical and people shouldn't touch it.

He said he researched for weeks to find the most eco-friendly product that was still strong enough to remove the sealer.

PPE has completed the same process on other properties, including GSC complexes Royal Park and Carolina Apartments. Haselden said that although there were a couple of complaints from residents, there were no major problems at the other properties.

"I don't know exactly what they did, to be honest," Haselden said of PineGate's communication to its residents. "We're the company, and we give them these forewarnings. I was hired to do a certain job, some stuff happened and it's honestly out of my control."

Representatives from PineGate declined to comment.

Terry Meyers, regional vice president for GSC, said representatives were on scene all day Wednesday and that he anticipates an official statement will be released sometime today.

Haselden of PPE said he bought the stripper cream, produced by Pennsylvania-based company EaCo Chem Inc., from a Raleigh-based retailer.

"This is not a normal application for (stripper cream)," said EaCo Chem president Lynn Peden. "It's a caustic, multi-layer stripper." He added that they have another product that would have removed the sealer without burning anyone.

Peden said contractors sometimes call the company for advice about their products, but that did not happen in this case.

He said he was surprised to hear PPE had used the stripper cream in the past successfully.

"It didn't seem like the best strategy in retrospect," he said.

As the investigation proceeded, residents were gleaning small pieces of information from maintenance workers, but all said they hadn't heard from other PineGate staff.

"It's already bad enough that they messed up," Stallings said. "The least they could do is give the residents some kind of communication to know what's going on."

Her fiancé Hassan was also worried about vet bills, which he estimated could be as high as \$1,000 if Hazel doesn't show improvement. As a chef for Orange County Schools, he is out of work for the summer and collecting unemployment.

"Who's going to be responsible?" he said. "People have to go to work. People have to do stuff. They can't just lock their doors and stay inside all day."



