

# Inspections of gas lines ordered

## Fire investigation focuses on gas pipe

**By Scott Williams  
Of The Examiner**

**OAK GROVE** — A natural gas leak suspected of igniting a fatal house explosion here Friday brought top corporate and government officials to the blast site with promises of quick and sweeping action.

David S. Black, president and chairman of KPL Gas Service Co., said KPL crews were dispatched to Oak Grove following the explosion to begin an immediate inspection of gas lines throughout the city.

Black toured the blast site in the early afternoon with several other KPL officials who had traveled from the company's headquarters in Topeka, Kan.

"It's a terrible tragedy," the company president said. "We're determined to eliminate this type of thing."

The KPL delegation was followed close behind

by three members of the state Public Service Commission, the agency that regulates public utilities in the state.

PSC Chairman William D. Steinmeier visited the scene with commission members James M. Fischer and Connie B. Hendren.

All three commissioners left Jefferson City at mid-morning and drove in for a first-hand look at the remains.

"It's a tragic sight," Steinmeier said, seemingly shaken from the experience. "What yesterday was a house is now just charred rubble."

The commission chairman said he is especially concerned because the Oak Grove blast, he said, seems similar to others that have occurred in Missouri and Kansas over the past several months.

"It's an enormous tragedy, a remarkable series of incidents in a short time," he said. "We're deeply concerned about this spate of accidents."

Steinmeier said the PSC had a team of investigators at the scene and would issue an independent report on the explosion.

He said the commission also would study new procedures for double-checking the safety inspec-

tions that are done regularly by KPL and other natural gas companies.

He said commission officials had been discussing the new program "since this morning."

Since last fall, natural gas leaks have been blamed for at least five house explosions that killed three persons and injured 18 others in Missouri and Kansas.

The explosion 6:30 a.m. Friday at 1300 Harding St. added two more names to the list. The bodies of Forrest Johnson, 77, and his wife, Ethylene Johnson, 75, were found in the basement of their home.

The couple had moved to Oak Grove last spring from a farm in nearby Lafayette County.

What little remained of their one-story, wood-framed house after the blast was destroyed by a fire that spread quickly and prevented any attempts to rescue the elderly couple.

Witnesses said they heard a woman screaming inside the house before firefighters arrived.

Chief Robert Lowe of the Sni Valley Fire Protection District said officials believe the Johnsons were upstairs before the explosion and fell into the

**See FIRE, page 12**