

FIRE

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basement when the floor collapsed beneath them.

He said the blast first sent debris flying up to 90 feet away and apparently was followed by an implosion that destroyed the inside of the house.

Lowe declined to comment on the condition of the victims' bodies.

An official at the Jackson County Medical Examiner's office said autopsies would be performed today.

Funeral services for the Johnsons have been scheduled for Sunday afternoon. The Royer Chapel in Oak Grove is handling the arrangements.

Asked whether the fire could have preceded the explosion, Lowe said: "What came first — the chicken or the egg? What do we care? We had a natural gas explosion and we've got two people dead."

After the fire was extinguished and the bodies were removed, more than a dozen investigators from at least four agencies began sifting through the rubble.

In addition to local and state investigators, an official from the National Transportation Safety Board was expected to arrive from Washington, D.C., to begin a federal investigation.

KPL spokesman Hal Hudson said investigators found evidence of an underground gas leak near the house, but they could not pinpoint the location.

Hudson said the investigation was focusing on a 40-foot bare steel service line that funneled gas from a KPL main along Harding Street to the Johnson house.

KPL records show that the pipe was installed when the house was built in 1963, he said.

After being unable to find the



The Examiner / Jim Dietz

KPL Gas Service officials work in a trench dug to reach the gas pipeline.

source of the leak through a battery of compression and smoke tests, KPL crews uprooted the pipe and retrieved sections for federal investigators to study.

"We know that there was a gas leak here," Hudson said. "Beyond that, we don't know what went on."

Found about 3 feet underground, the service line appeared badly corroded.

KPL began a program to inspect 360,000 bare steel pipes in Missouri and Kansas following a house explo-

sion in Overland Park, Kan., last September.

The steel pipes are more susceptible to corrosion than the plastic-coated service lines KPL now uses.

Before Friday's tragedy, the company had completed its inspections in Kansas and had inspected about half of Missouri's estimated 200,000 bare steel lines.

Hudson said crews were called in Friday from Kansas City, Lee's Summit and elsewhere to begin inspec-

ting all 1,200 such pipes in Oak Grove.

He did not know how many inspectors had been mobilized, but he estimated that the entire city could be inspected within a week.

Black, the KPL president, said he believes the inspection program is unprecedented in the natural gas industry and will give KPL "the safest system in the country."

"Of course, we had hoped," he added, "to do that before we had another house explosion."