



BRYNN ANDERSON/ASSOCIATED PRESS
A firefighter walks through rubble left behind after an explosion Saturday in Plantation, Florida. A vacant pizza restaurant is thought to be the source of the blast.

Gas leak suspected in Florida strip mall blast; 23 people hurt

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South Florida Sun-Sentinel

PLANTATION, Fla. — An explosion at a Plantation shopping center injured 23 people around 11:30 a.m. local time Saturday, in a loud blast that could be felt for miles around. No deaths have been reported.

The blast tore through the shops near LA Fitness on S. University Drive in Plantation, about six miles west of Fort Lauderdale, shortly before 11:30 a.m., fire Battalion Chief Joel Gordon told reporters.

First responders found and secured an active gas leak when they got to the strip mall, Gordon said, but had not confirmed whether that caused the explosion.

“We cannot confirm that a gas leak caused this explosion,” Gordon said. “We suspect it was but we cannot confirm that yet.”

“At this point, nobody was killed. Thank goodness for that,” he added. “As bad as it is, it could have been a lot worse.”

Two people were taken to Broward Health Medical Center in serious condition, while the others had non-life-threatening injuries, Gordon said.

Police Sgt. Jessica Ryan said no one was found trapped in the rubble at Fountains Plaza.

Dozens of firefighters responded and could be seen

picking through the rubble with dogs sniffing through the debris to make sure people weren’t trapped.

Fire Rescue initially had trouble getting close to the scene because of debris blocking the access roads to the two adjacent shopping centers, Fountains Plaza and the Plantation Marketplace, Gordon told reporters.

The Broward Sheriff’s Office bomb and arson unit joined state fire marshals at the scene. Representatives of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, and a TECO Energy crew, joined the investigation.

Witnesses said a vacant pizza restaurant appeared to be the source of the explosion. The explosion demolished the building, leaving behind only part of its metal frame. The restaurant, called PizzaFire, had been out of business for several months. The blast also blew out the windows of a popular fitness club next door at the shopping plaza in Broward County.

Michael Lind, a former firefighter who helped evacuate people, told the Miami Herald that all that remained of the vacant pizza shop was its frame.

“It was like a war zone,” Lind told the Herald. “I’ve seen buildings blow up in the past but I’ve never seen it like this. It was just so much debris. The sheet

metal was twisted. There was a lot of energy behind that explosion.”

The explosion was heard and felt for miles.

Niko Davis, 12, was at home with his mom about three miles away when they heard a “boom” and heard the windows on their house shake.

The explosion scattered large pieces of concrete as far as 50 yards away and sent pieces of metal as far as 100 yards across the street. Alex Carver, a worker at a deli across the street from the explosion, said two of his co-workers’ cars were destroyed.

“We thought it was thunder at first, and then we felt the building shake and things started falling. I looked outside and it was almost like the world was ending,” said Carver. “It was nuts, man. It was crazy.”

Some onlookers meandered throughout the plaza as firefighters and police picked through a large debris field.

Just before the blast, Evan Hoffman, 47, of Davie, was working out with his wife, Stacey, at LA Fitness.

“A huge, huge bang, thump, almost, explosion,” he said. “It started shaking back and forth and the roof tiles started crashing down and the power went out.”

The Washington Post and Associated Press contributed.



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