

# Center Store crushed



PHOTO BY JEFF POOLE

**Somerset Center Store owner David McElheney stares at the destruction caused when a tractor-trailer ran a stop sign on Route 231 and plowed into the storefront last Wednesday morning. Miraculously, no one was seriously injured.**

## No one severely injured after truck plows through Somerset landmark

**BY JEFF POOLE**  
Editor

“We all said it would happen one day.”

Renee McElheney sat on the ground outside the Somerset Center Store unhurt after a tractor-trailer plowed into the front of the store last Wednesday morning, ultimately leveling the iconic structure.

According to Virginia State Police Sgt. Brent Coffey, a 2013 Peterbilt tractor-trailer was traveling from the Madison side of Route 231 when it ran a stop sign at the intersection of Route 20 and collided with a 1994 Freightliner dump truck heading toward the town of Orange. The impact caused the tractor-trailer to run off the roadway and collide with the Somerset Center Store. The impact forced the dump truck off the roadway, into a tree and a nearby house.

The driver of the tractor-trailer, Gabriel J. Garcia, 29, of Womelsdorf, Pa., was uninjured in the crash. He was wearing his seatbelt.

The driver of the dump truck, Brent M. Spitzer,

54, of Gordonsville, suffered minor injuries in the crash and was transported to the University of Virginia Medical Center for treatment. He also was wearing a seatbelt.

Sgt. Coffey said there is no indication either of the drivers was speeding at the time of the collision. Garcia’s trailer was loaded with vegetables bound for the Walmart distribution center in Zion Crossroads, Coffey said. Spitzer’s dump truck was empty. Garcia was charged with failure to obey a stop sign.

Not long after Garcia’s truck plowed through the store’s gas pumps and brought the building down upon his truck, the popular Somerset store was swarmed with fire and rescue units, law enforcement officers and anxious onlookers.

As motorists were waved through the intersection by Orange County Sheriff’s deputies, many had their phones out taking photos or videos of the crumbled cinderblock structure and the tail end of the large truck emerging from it. Onlookers

> See **SOMERSET CENTER STORE**, page A7



PHOTO BY JEFF POOLE

Pictured is the Somerset Center Store in 2017 when VDOT first began discussing a traffic circle at the dangerous intersection of Route 20 and Route 231.



PHOTO BY JEFF POOLE

Work began on the traffic circle in March. The speed limit in the work zone has been reduced to 35 mph and the project is expected to be completed in December.



PHOTO BY JEFF POOLE

This was the scene last Wednesday after the store was leveled when a tractor-trailer ran a stop sign, hit a dump truck (far right) on Route 20 and then crashed into the storefront.

## > Somerset Center Store continued from page A1

congregated on nearby lawns and Blue Run Baptist Church doubled not only as a turn-around point for northbound Route 231 traffic, but also as a parking spot for those hoping to get a closer look. Construction work on the traffic circle stopped as most of those standing around shook their head in amazement no one was seriously injured.

A smell of gasoline floated through the air as firefighters worked to secure the scene and keep onlookers away from the building and the danger of vehicles leaking fuel.

While the tractor-trailer struck the front of the store, much of the back of the building was exposed from the force of the blow. The small bathroom at the rear of the store was missing its exterior wall and cinderblocks were scattered around the base of the building.

Those who didn't know

what the store once looked like could hardly tell what it once had been.

Sarah Aguilar, normally up front in the store and behind the counter, was back by the trademark picnic table when the truck came barreling through the storefront.

"Thank God I was. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here talking to you," she said. "I felt it. I didn't see it." Aguilar said she and McElheney, who was sitting at a nearby desk to be closer to the air conditioner, were unhurt and able to escape the building by going down the back stairs and out the basement door.

"I'm just glad we didn't have any customers in the store," McElheney added. "We were lucky we were the only ones in the store. I guess we'll have to tear it down."

Roy Perry of Rapidan, working with Chemung Contracting crew on the Virginia Department of Transportation traffic circle

project aimed to improve traffic flow and reduce accidents, said he and co-worker Randy Smith saw and heard the wreck and ran over to see if they could help.

Perry said they saw the driver of the tractor-trailer crawl out from under the rubble.

"When we got close, we smelled gas and took a step back. We were worried about the women who work in there, but we saw they had crawled out the back," he said.

"My first thought was those two women would be hurt, but the good Lord was there today," Smith added.

"We thought for sure there would be some major injuries," Perry said.

At the house behind the Center Store, Brandon Garcia-Mendez said many of his family were inside when the dump truck struck the tree beside the house. "They felt the house shake," he said, translating for his family members. "My sister said she

was afraid the house was going to fall in on them."

Pastor Robert Anthony, of nearby Blue Run Baptist Church, Barbourville, and the Barbourville Volunteer Fire Company noted, "If not for that tree there, that dump truck would've gone through that house."

Just before noon Wednesday, VDOT reported it closed Route 231 between Route 20 and Route 655 (Jacksontown Road) and was diverting traffic as state police investigated the accident and emergency service crews worked to contain leaking fuel. It reopened the road shortly before 8 p.m. later that evening after the cab of the truck had been extracted from the store and the roadway cleared of debris.

Dozens of onlookers gathered around the store that evening watching the spectacle, still marveling no one was seriously injured.

The \$1.8 million traffic

circle project, which began in March, is expected to be completed by December. In late March, the speed limit in the construction zone had been reduced to 35 mph. More than two dozen crashes had been reported at the intersection between 2010 and 2015. Approximately 3,800 vehicles use Rt. 20 every day, and some 1,200 vehicles traverse Rt. 231.

McElheney said there was a bad accident in front of the store just last week. She and her husband, David, have owned and operated the store since 1998. It was built in the 1940s.

"I was almost in tears when I got here," Scuffletown Road dairy farmer Justin Rhodes said. "The Center Store is a landmark. I was over on the farm when I heard the sirens and I came over. Sarah has been like a second mother to me. I eat here almost every day and it seems like there's a bad accident here every few weeks."



PHOTOS BY JEFF POOLE

Pictured at top left, the rear of the store was blown out by the blast, while the dump truck struck in the intersection is pictured at the far left of the photo. Bottom left, a view of the scene facing the former store. Above right, the building is flattened after wrecker crews remove the cab of the tractor-trailer. Bottom right, the chassis of the trailer is pictured in the store's parking area. It came loose from the trailer in the crash.