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Fire strikes at Townehouse Apartments in Amherst late Saturday night By Sara Cody and Jeffrey R. Larnard

Early Sunday morning, the Amherst Fire Department received a call reporting a fire in the living room of apartment 86 of the Townehouse Apartments on Meadow Street of North Amherst.

"We had a report I believe about 12:30 of a fire in apartment number 86 that came from the neighbors, not the occupants," Amherst Fire Department Fire Chief Lindsay Stromgren said.

The cause of the fire is still unknown, but at the time of the fire, the apartment was unoccupied and had been for over 24 hours, according Stromgren.

"There was nobody home in 86. When our crews got here we did have fire in the living room of number 86. About 20 or 30 minutes we had that fire under control," Stromgren said. "Fairly heavy damage to number 86, but I don't believe any fire damage to any other units."

The residents of the apartment, who were away for the weekend, were contacted by the fire department and notified of the incident. They were said to be returning to Amherst on Sunday.

Matt Lee, a senior communications major at the University of Massachusetts, as he walked down the hallway to his Townhouse apartment, noticed the fire.

"I walked in and saw some smoke in the hallway and I didn't really think much of it, I thought someone maybe burned something," Lee said, as he waited to hear if he would be able to return to his apartment. "I walked out about 10 minutes later and there was smoke everywhere."

Lee and others in his apartment banged on the door to see if anyone was inside, as UMass junior Galina McDonnell called in the fire.

Standing at the sliding window in the back of the apartment, Lee, McDonnell and friends said they could see the fire, and waited for the police to show up.

"The carpet and the curtain were on fire and from what the police officer said, the couch was on fire," McDonnell said. "The cop came and told everyone to back up, and then was banging on the glass, and then he broke the glass and then just yelled in 'Police, is anyone here?' He stepped in, and then came back out because there was so much smoke."

Lee and McDonnell, who live a few doors down, were told they would not be able to return to the apartment that night, as well as a number of other Townhouse residents.

"[There are] a total of six apartments that people are not going to be able to stay in [Saturday night]," Stromgren said.

Little is known about the cause of the fire, especially with the apartment being empty for more than a day, and may be discovered anywhere from a couple of hours to a couple of days.

"We have two of our fire investigators here now and they are going to start the investigation and we will also be contacting the state fire Marshall," Stromgren said.

Lee and McDonnell stated that someone at the scene said an electrical issue may have caused it and also noted that the electric company was at the scene.

"We've released most of our people. We have two engines left here right now to do the investigations," Stromgrem said at 2 a.m. near the scene of the fire. "During the fire we did have to call in a mutual aid engine company from Northampton and Belchertown to cover the town, [but] they didn't come to the fire. All of our personnel were tied up, so they were covering the station in case other calls came in."

This story is accompanied by a video and photo slideshow.