



BREAKING NEWS

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FAA to investigate plane crash that killed six, including three prominent Georgia Republicans

By Andy Matthews, Editor

HOLLY SPRINGS — Six people, at least three of them prominent members of the Georgia Republican party and friends of Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue, were killed late this morning when a 9-passenger twin-engine turbo prop en route from Polk County, Georgia crashed into a

neighborhood near Mount Airy-Surry County Airport. The King Air C90A crashed around 11:35 a.m. about three miles southeast of Mount Airy near U.S. 52 South in a housing development off Janice Drive, less than 1,000 feet from the airport's runway. Several fire and rescue crews were on the scene, blocking roads and covering the wreckage and the front yard where the plane crashed with foam in case any of the remaining fuel ignited.

"Everyone get back a safe distance," a deputy sheriff with the Surry County Sheriff's Office warned. "We still have some fuel left."

No one on the ground was injured, nor were any homes damaged. The entire wreckage was concentrated in a front yard, actually leaving the house's mailbox intact.

Local investigators immediately secured the scene off Holly Springs Road in northeast Surry County as they waited for investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board to arrive Friday evening.

Local officials say they believe that the plane, which left a Georgia airport around 10:30 a.m., may have been trying to find an alternate landing site before it crashed nose first into ground, splitting in half. There was one unconfirmed report suggesting that the pilot may have been attempting to dump fuel shortly before the crash since investigators found a large pool of diesel fuel not far from the accident.

Several neighborhood residents said they heard a roar of an engine shortly before the crash.

"I was in the basement when I heard a loud boom," said neighborhood resident Carl Marshall. "All I heard was a boom . . . It looks like it just fell out of the sky."

Kelvin Boyette, an official with Mount Airy-Surry County Airport said that he heard the plane, believing it was making a landing attempt.

"I walked back into my building and heard the engines coming back and then a big boom," Boyette said.

Neighborhood resident Darrell Baker was one of the first eyewitnesses on the scene. Baker said that he arrived too late to rescue any passengers. Instead he was shocked to see some grisly remains.

"I ran to the plane and I seen the guy in the cockpit," Baker said as he surveyed the wreckage in front of him just beyond the yellow police tape. "He looked pretty bad and I knew I couldn't help him. Then I ran around to the other side to see if I could see anybody else and I couldn't see a second person at first . . . I did see some hunting rifles and equipment in there."

Bridgett Hanks, who lives in the neighborhood of 40 to 50 homes, was one of several residents who said they heard what was apparent engine problems shortly before the plane crashed.

"I heard it and I felt it," Hanks said. "It sounded like the engine revved up and then just a big boom."

Early reports suggest that the passengers on the plane may have been on a hunting trip to Claudville, Va. when they attempted to land at the small municipal airport. A spokesperson for Primland, a 12,000-acre hunting preserve in the Blue Ridge Mountains declined comment this afternoon on whether the plane was headed to the resort.

The Federal Aviation Administration said that the plane is registered to Blue Sky Airways in Dallas, Ga. whose CEO is John Wesley Rakestraw, a Paulding County developer who has held fund raisers for Perdue.

According to Darrell L. Galloway, head of the Paulding County Republican Party, Rakestraw is believe to be one of the dead. Also killed, according to Galloway, are developer Steve Simpson, and Paulding County Commissioner Hal Echols.

Several residents who have lived in this quiet neighborhood for decades said it's the first time they have ever seen an aircraft crash in the subdivision. Miraculous, many of them observed, the plane and its impact caused no injuries on the ground.

"I've been here for 30 years and I've never seen anything like it," Baker said. "It's a miracle that no one on the ground was hurt."

Tommy Buckholtz has lived in the neighborhood for 27 years. He continued to look over the scattered wreckage early Friday afternoon and shake his head as emergency personnel scrambled to secure the area, staging several fire trucks as a precaution. Within an hour after the crash, the remains of the plane were almost completely covered with foam and a strong odor of diesel fuel permeated the area.

"I've never seen anything like this," Buckholtz said. "This takes the cake."

Friends and family of the crash victims can contact AirCRAFT Casualty Emotional Support Services (ACCESS), which provides grief counseling for loved ones who have lost their relatives in plane crashes. The toll-free help line is 1-877-277-6435. Individuals can also contact Renee Brasseur at 1-917-549-3364, email heidi@accesshelp.org, or visit www.accesshelp.org

"We are here to help the victims in anyway that we can," Brasseur said Friday afternoon.

For more details on the crash, go to www.mtairynews.com, or pick up a copy of Saturday's The Mount Airy News. Additional photos from the plane crash are available at our photo gallery.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.