Deaths, fire called arson-murder-suicide

BY RUSS ZIMMER AND CHAD KLIMACK • ADVOCATE REPORTERS • FEBRUARY 11, 2009

PATASKALA — Investigators are calling the deaths of two men and a house fire that preceded the discovery of their bodies a murder-suicide and arson. Jeffrey P. McKnight, 53, and Charles E. McKnight, 94, were found dead Tuesday inside a home at 7048 Summit Road, authorities said Wednesday.

The elder McKnight died from a single stab wound to the chest, while the younger McKnight’s cause of death was gunshot wounds to the head and chest, according to Mickey Lymon, investigator for the Licking County Coroner’s Office.

There were no signs of a struggle and no other wounds or significant marks, said Pataskala Police Chief Chris Forshey and Lymon, whose office performed the autopsies today.

“The preliminary investigation clearly supports the murder-suicide and arson,” Forshey said. “The house (at 57 Amber Road) was in foreclosure. There is evidence present to show (Jeffrey P. McKnight) planned and carried this out.”

Lymon said the Coroner’s Office has not issued a ruling but does believe the case appears to be a homicide-suicide. No time of death has been established yet, she added.

Forshey and Deputy Chief Bruce Brooks had gone Tuesday evening to the Summit Road home, which county records show is registered to the elder McKnight, after information “indicated a strong possibility the fire had been deliberately started” at the Amber Road home, the release reads.

Jeffrey P. McKnight was the owner of the Amber Road house, which was totally lost to the fire, until Dec. 31 when it was transferred to Chemical Mortgage Co. after a foreclosure auction, according to a deed on order of sale from the Licking County Recorder’s Office. He had been living with his father in recent weeks, Forshey said.

Fire investigators discovered “indications of pour patterns and accelerants” at the Amber Road home, indicating the fire was deliberately set, Forshey said.

They also discovered ammunition and crates possibly containing ordnance at the Amber Road home and firearms at the Summit Road home, Forshey said. The Columbus Fire Bomb Squad and federal agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives inspected both the scenes, the release reads.

The crates at the Amber Road home ended up being empty, but Forshey said it was important to take precautions considering the proximity of neighbors and investigators, who were collecting evidence at both scenes.

Although Forshey said some of that evidence suggests the murder-suicide was thoroughly planned, he said Wednesday morning he could not release any additional details.