

# Suspect in care home fire had previous record of trouble

By **TERRIE MORGAN-BESECKER**  
Special to The Dallas Post

**JACKSON TWP.** — A mentally handicapped man who, police said, admitted setting fire to his group home July 10 was previously accused of setting two other fires, leading the township's police chief to question why the man was not in a more secure facility.

"He was supposed to be under 24 hour observation. Obviously that's not working," Chief Jérôme Leedock said of Warren Rensa, 39.

Rensa was charged Thursday with four counts of arson and other offenses, including simple and aggravated assault, reckless endangerment and risking a catastrophe, after police said he set fire to clothing in his closet at the Step By Step group home at 513 Smith Pond Road in Jackson Township.

Rensa and three staff workers were home when the blaze was discovered at about 8:30 a.m. One of the workers suffered smoke inhalation and a sprained ankle while trying to extinguish the fire.

The case is nearly identical to

a 1996 incident in which Rensa was charged with setting fire to clothing in a closet in a group home at 210 Johnson St. in Wilkes-Barre Township. Those charges were withdrawn by prosecutors. Court records did not indicate why the case was not prosecuted.

Last July Rensa was charged with burglarizing a home and setting papers on fire in a cabin owned by Thomas and Sandy Morris of Jackson Church Road. Police said Rensa broke into the properties after he walked away from the same Step By Step group home he is accused of setting on fire. He pleaded guilty to burglary and other charges and was sentenced in September to two years probation.

Leedock said he asked mental health officials last year to transfer Rensa to a more secure facility but the request was declined.

"They felt this was his home, and he was entitled to go back to his home," Leedock said. "They didn't feel he was a danger."

James Bobeck, executive director of Step By Step, said con-

fidentiality laws prevent him from discussing Rensa's case. He did say all residents are evaluated by the Luzerne/Wyoming counties Mental Health and Mental Retardation program to determine if a group home is a suitable placement.

Jim Gallagher, executive director of that agency, said mental health officials look at a patient's history and current mental state in making that determination. He said he could not say why workers felt Rensa was safe to return to a group home, citing confidentiality laws.

"It's very difficult to predict a person's behavior in the future," Gallagher said. "The best we can do is make an educated judgment."

Rensa was arraigned before District Justice James Tupper July 11 on the latest charges. Shackled and handcuffed, he rocked back and forth in his chair as Tupper read the charges. He also chatted with two Step By Step workers, asking them if he would be able to return to the home.

"I did it now. I'm done. I won't be coming back," he said, speak-

ing aloud to himself.

According to the arrest affidavit:

Rensa started the fire with a cigarette lighter, then returned to the home's kitchen. A smoke alarm alerted group home worker David Pall, who tried to extinguish the fire, but was pushed back by heavy smoke and ran from the home.

A second group home worker, Christopher Konieski, re-entered the home and tried to extinguish the blaze, but was pushed back by smoke. Konieski became disoriented, ran into an object while exiting the home and sprained his ankle. He was treated for smoke inhalation at the scene.

At the scene, Leedock approached Rensa, who became belligerent and threatened to shoot the officer and "pull his eyes out." Rensa ignored Leedock's demands to quiet down, then struggled with the officer and spat in his face as he placed Rensa under arrest. Rensa later admitted he set the fire because the staff "doesn't take him out anywhere."

Tupper set bail at \$25,000



FOR THE DALLAS POST/MADALYN RUGGIERO

Jackson Township police officers escort Warren Rensa from his arraignment Thursday on charges he set fire to the group home where he lived.

and returned Rensa to the Luzerne County Correctional Facility, where he is being held for violating conditions of his probation in the 2001 burglary case. A preliminary hearing was tentatively scheduled for July 18, but Tupper said it will likely be continued.

This article appeared in original form in the Times Leader.

## Lake-Lehman

(continued from page 1)

not know they would be affected.

"I knew when I bought my house where my children were going to attend school," said Ron Swingle, a wrestling coach at the junior high school. "I feel we are now being punished by this creating of undue hardships on our families by pulling our children out and now placing them in a situation that I feel is a detriment to their education process."

Lisa Swanson, who was overcome by her emotions at one point, began, "I am very bitter." Her husband said he felt betrayed and was concerned about the distance between the schools he must drive to pick up his children should an emergency arise. "I don't think the board understands the magnitude of this decision and the effect it will have on parents," said Rick Swanson.

Many parents stressed to board members their inability to adjust work schedules or quit jobs to accommodate the new schedules or to find or afford before and after-school child care. Currently, day care is available at Lehman-Jackson and Lake-Noxen but not at Ross. Lack of information and poor dissemination of that information was also an issue.

A letter from the school district, dated June 28, was the first notification beyond rumors most parents received that their children would be transferred to

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**Rick Swanson**  
Lake-Lehman parent

Ross Elementary. The minimal information in the letter only contributed to parent's unease. Superintendent Robert O. Roberts apologized for not personally reviewing the letter, which had his signature on it, sent out by the transportation department.

Roberts said transportation schedules would be published the second week of August. The high school and middle school will continue to start school at 8 a.m. with Lehman-Jackson and Lake-Noxen starting at 8:25 a.m. and Ross at 9:05 a.m., with teachers in a half hour earlier for common planning time.

The board voted in May to change the schedules of the Lehman-Jackson and Ross Elementary schools to include common planning time for elementary teachers and approved a dual busing system to allow secondary and elementary school students to ride separate buses. Elementary school principal Dave McLaughlin-Smith said it was his experience that students of teachers who had common planning time performed better on standardized tests.

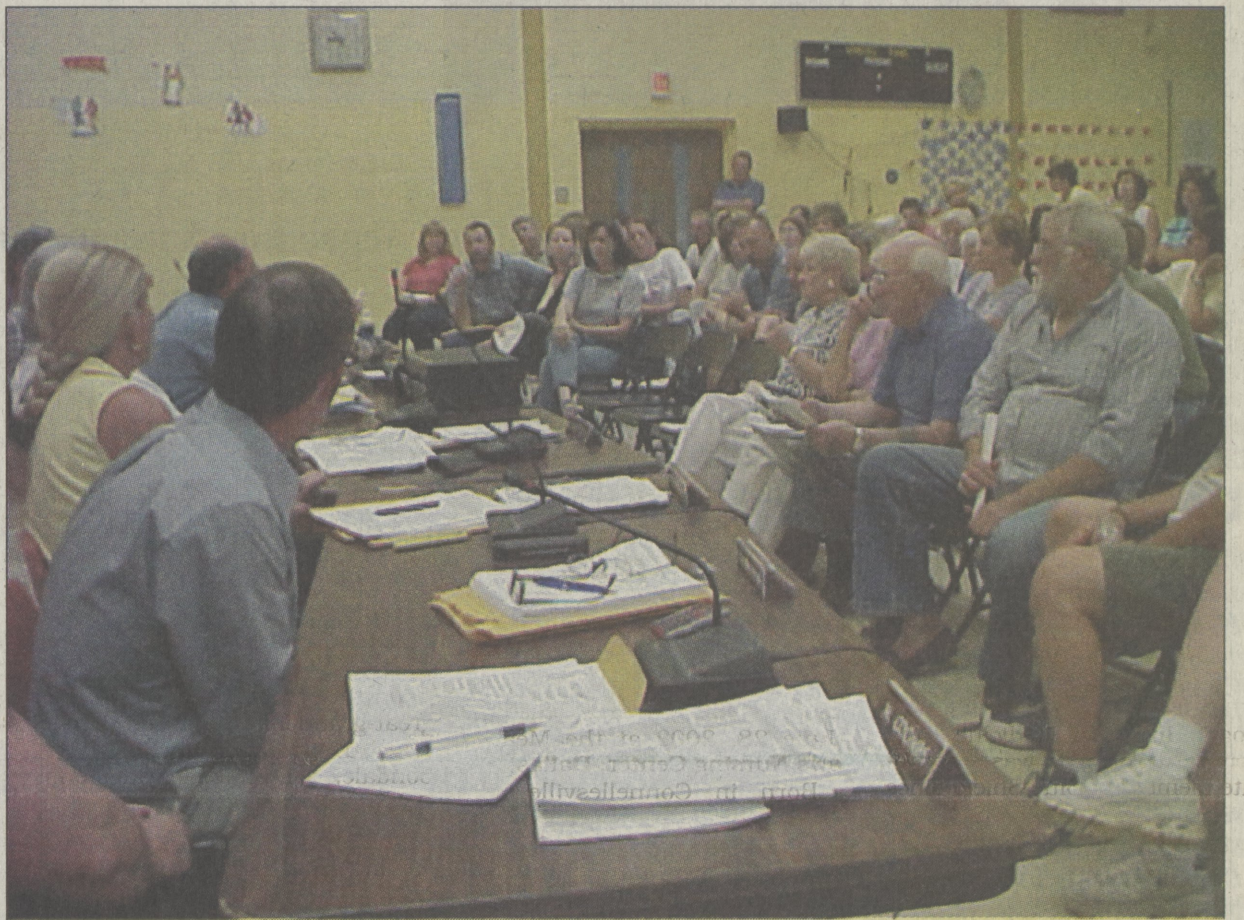
Transportation costs increased \$62,000 over the previous year due to the changing schedule and dual bus system. Common planning time will save the district the salary of one teacher. The board decided to address the issues further in a special meeting to be held Thursday, July 25 at 7 p.m.

In other business:

- Several students and student athletes voiced concerns once again over the teachers' contract negotiations, asking board members for a speedy conclusion and an avoidance of a possible strike.

- The board will reopen the 2002-2003 budget to include \$52,502 increase in basic education funding, \$35,800 for non-public and charter school transportation and \$4,582 for charter school reimbursement.

The board decided to spend the extra funds on educational items, with board members Angelo DeCesaris and Joseph Kapitula voting no on the agenda item. DeCesaris felt more time was needed to look over the options and Kapitula wanted to reduce millage.



POST PHOTO/ELIZABETH ANDERSON

More than 60 worried parents attended the Lake-Lehman School Board meeting Tuesday night to speak to board members about changing schedule times and the transferring of some 43 elementary school students from Lehman-Jackson to the recently completed Ross Elementary School.

There will be a special meeting to address the issues of the parents and to vote on hiring of a band director and music teacher on Thursday, July 25 at 5:15 p.m. in the music room of

the Lehman-Jackson Elementary School.

The next regular committee-of-the-whole meeting will be Tuesday, August 6 at 7 p.m. and the next regular meeting for general

purposes will be Tuesday, August 20 at 7 p.m. Both meeting will be held in the music room of the Lehman-Jackson Elementary School.

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