

Firefighter faces trial for setting two barn fires

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AMITY — A volunteer firefighter who allegedly set two barn fires in the township over a six-month period is headed to trial to face the felony charges against him.

Michael James Morrotto, 26, of 274 E. Baumstown Road, Birdsboro, waived charges of arson and related offenses during his preliminary hearing Wednesday before District Judge Victor Frederick IV. Morrotto was a volunteer firefighter with Monarch Fire Company at the time he allegedly set two fires in the township in 2009 and 2010.

Morrotto was led into the court by a constable, and stood before Judge Frederick wearing a yellow Berks County Prison-issued shirt.

Although Morrotto waived the charges against him, including second- and third-degree felony counts of arson, criminal trespass and possession of explosive or incendiary material, Morrotto's public defender requested his \$200,000 bail be reduced.

Berks County Assistant District Attorney Catherine Nadirov argued against any reduction in bail stating, "It's a felony arson offense, actually several of them," which she said were "serious" offenses. "We'd ask that bail remain."

Judge Frederick agreed with Nadirov, saying "Under the circumstances, I'd agree that bail is appropriate."

According to the criminal complaint filed by Amity Township Officer Jeffrey Smith, Smith was assigned in January 2011 to follow up on two arson investigations for incidents that occurred around 2:12 a.m. Aug. 20, 2009 and 1:40 a.m. Jan. 7, 2010. The first fire occurred at a two-story wood-frame barn in the area of Main Street and Monocacy Creek Road. The second fire occurred at a barn at 178 Amity Park Road. Both fires were determined by investigators to be arson.

Smith said the total cost of damage caused by the arson fires amounts to approximately \$50,600.

When Smith began his investigation in January 2011, he accessed the 911 call made to Berks County Radio on Aug. 20, 2009. According to court records, Smith learned the call was made by an individual who reported seeing smoke in the area of Main Street and Monocacy Creek Road and during the 911 call, another man is heard in the background saying "Tell them you're with a firefighter with Monarch."

Smith interviewed the man who made the call to 911, and, according to the criminal complaint, that man admitted to being with Morrotto at the time Morrotto allegedly set the fire Aug. 20, 2010.

Court papers indicate the man who reported the fire told Smith he was with Morrotto in Morrotto's truck when Morrotto took a flare from his truck and went inside a barn at Main Street and Monocacy Creek Road. The man told Smith that Morrotto "proceeded to light the flare inside the barn and then left the scene." The man told Smith Morrotto drove around in the area before driving passed the barn and calling 911, and then Morrotto dropped the man off before he proceeded to Monarch Fire Station, court papers state.

When Smith interviewed Morrotto Feb. 11, 2011, Morrotto agreed to give a statement to police and admitted to setting the barn fire at Main Street and Monocacy Creek Road using a flare and he also admitted to setting the fire on Amity Park Road, Smith indicated in the criminal complaint.

Police said more arrests are pending in the case.

Specific details about how long Morrotto had been volunteering with Monocacy Fire Company were not immediately available. However, Mercury archives indicated he had been a firefighter with the company since at least May, 2009 when he spoke with Daniel Boone High School students during a mock crash presentation at the school about the dangers of reckless driving.

Morrotto explained to the students that his father, Charles Morrotto Jr., was killed by a drunken driver and real-life circumstances, such as those outlined in the mock crash "could really happen."

Morrotto remains incarcerated in Berks County Prison in lieu of \$200,000 cash bail awaiting further court action.