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Six killed when plane crashes into house in Gaithersburg



Fatal plane crash in Gaithersburg



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A small jet crashed into a home in Montgomery County, killing 3 onboard and 3 on the ground.

By **Dan Morse** and **Ashley Halsey III** December 8

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(Update: [Investigation continues of plane crash that left six dead in Maryland](#))

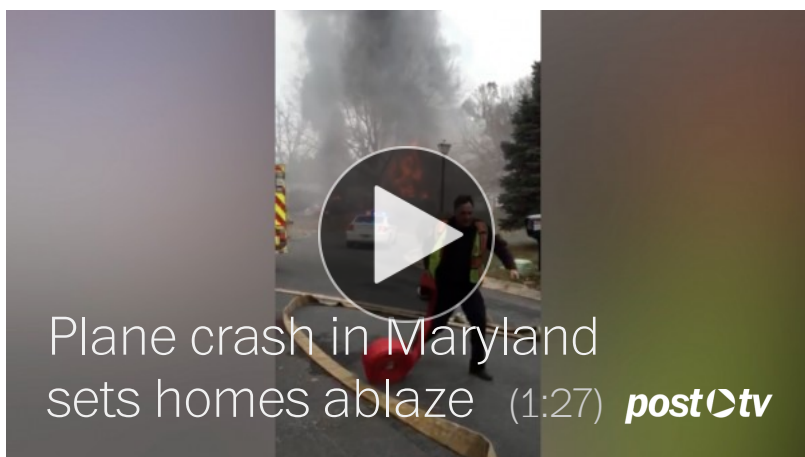
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At a few minutes before 11 a.m., the day was well underway for a young mother, her infant son and his toddler brother when a twin-engine jet, on its final approach to a regional airport in Gaithersburg, crashed into their home.

The plane caromed into two homes before its wing tumbled into 19733 Drop Forge Lane, erupting into a fireball. The pilot, two passengers, the mother and her children were killed.

As people rushed from their houses, Marie Gemmell, 36, had been in a desperate fight to save 3-year-old Cole and 6-week-old Devon. She rushed them into a windowless bathroom on the second floor.

“It appears the mother was trying to protect her children. It appears she was covering them to try to protect them,” said Montgomery fire spokesman Pete Piringer.



Social video captures the aftermath of a plane crash in Maryland that set homes ablaze Monday. (The Washington Post)

“She tried to save these kids,” Police Chief J. Thomas Manger said of the mother of three, who friends said was

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on maternity leave from her job at a bank.

“She had nowhere to go,” he added. “She couldn’t get out of the bathroom. One kid was between her legs, and the other was in her arms.”

(Air traffic control audio: ‘There’s nothing left’ of this house)

Within seconds of the crash, another pilot looked down in horror. “There’s nothing left of that house down there,” he said.

The black Honda SUV parked snugly against the garage door indicated that there probably were people inside the house, and neighbors rushed around the outside, looking for an opening in the flames through which they might dart in.

The plane lay on the front lawn in pieces, as though “it just fell apart,” Jocelyn Brown, 21, said.

“It’s like somebody took the screws out,” she said.

Map: Gaithersburg plane crash



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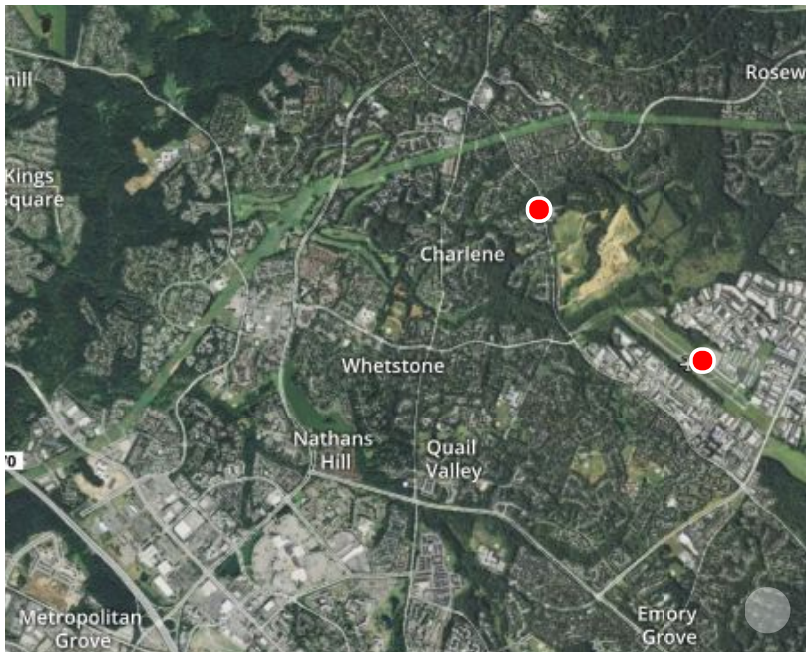
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This amusement park classic will bring back some joyous memories



With a flight data recorder in hand, National Transportation Safety Board investigators should quickly determine what caused the crash, although their methodical process may not reveal the telling details for several months.

What would become tragedy on Drop Forge Lane began to unfold hours earlier, when a small jet plane — an Embraer EMB-500/Phenom 100 — set out from North Carolina to carry three members of the medical research firm Health Decisions to an important meeting with Food and Drug Administration officials in Montgomery County.

Before Michael Rosenberg set out to fly to Maryland, he called his company's technology department to sort out a Web site issue.

(Video: Police say death toll climbs to six)

“He sounded great,” said an IT worker. “It was just standard tech support stuff. A minor issue, really.”

He was a veteran pilot — he was certified to fly commercial planes and to teach novice pilots — but it was the second time that Rosenberg had crashed while landing at the Montgomery County Airpark. In March 2010, he suffered minor injuries [when he crashed a Socata TBM 700](#), a turbo-propeller plane. He was coming from North Carolina on that trip, too.

On Monday, his voice sounded matter-of-fact as he talked with air traffic controllers — using his call sign, 100 Echo Quebec — while approaching Runway 14.

“Montgomery traffic, 100 Echo Quebec is now 7 miles” from landing.

“Montgomery traffic, 100 Echo Quebec is now 6,000 [feet], straight” toward the runway.

“Montgomery traffic, 100 Echo Quebec is 3 [miles] out, straight in [toward] 1-4.”

Then came a call from another pilot who saw what happened:

“We got a Phenom [jet] crash at the end of the runway.”

The airport is an uncontrolled runway, which means that, as opposed to larger airports, there is no air traffic control tower directing final approaches. The county-owned airport opened in 1959 to relieve aviation traffic into what is now Reagan National Airport. Since the emergence of Baltimore-Washington International Marshall Airport and Dulles International Airport, the facility in Gaithersburg has transformed into one used by small planes and business travelers.

The airport has about 100,000 annual departures and arrivals and is the fourth-busiest general aviation airport in Maryland.

There have been two accidents at the Gaithersburg airport this year. On Sept. 13, a U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary Cessna nosed over after landing. The pilot and two passengers were not injured. Three weeks earlier, the pilot of a Piper plane was seriously injured when he made a forced landing after his engine failed. There have been 12 crashes at the airpark since 1996, none of them fatal.

On Monday morning, Tracy Everett said he was driving his work van when he looked up and saw that the plane was “unsteady” and in trouble. “It was wobbly,” he said. “It was 100 to 200 above the trees.” He said the plane then did a rolling dive to the left, and then “I saw smoke.”

He said he drove to the scene and “saw and heard a secondary explosion. It was so powerful you could feel it under your feet.”

Dianne Gayle, who lives on the street, said she heard a plane overhead as she was working in her living room. That’s not unusual, given how close she and her neighbors live to the airport.

Then she heard a boom, and her house seemed to shake. She jumped up, looked out her window and saw a home down the street engulfed in flames. Gayle called 911. “The house is on fire! The house is on fire!” she remembered telling the operator. “A plane crashed into the house! A plane crashed into the house!”

Gayle walked outside. “It was a total inferno,” she remembered.

Gayle spotted cars in the driveway of the burning house and desperately hoped no one was home. “Dear God, don’t let them be inside,” she said.

In an interview later, Gayle’s husband, O’Neil, said he saw the Gemmells out on walks, and saw them doting on their children. “They are a loving, friendly family,” O’Neil Gayle said.

Byron Valencia, 31, who lives about a half-mile from the crash site, said he was in his kitchen preparing a bottle for his 2-month-old son. “I heard the plane come over the house,” he said. “This one sounded like a jet, and then I heard a thump. It was pretty loud. I didn’t see anything, but then I heard the sirens.”

Miriam Arevalo, who lives with her husband and two children a block from the crash site, was home waiting for a ride to work when she heard a big boom.

“I heard a big explosion. It’s like nothing I’ve ever heard before,” she said. “I immediately thought, ‘Oh my God, it is a plane.’”

At the FDA offices, James Higgins, executive vice president of Health Decisions, waited anxiously for Rosenberg and two other colleagues to arrive. Instead, he got word of the crash.

“He’s in shock,” said Barbara Higgins, his wife, “and he’s also trying to figure out what they’re going to do on their end.”

The Gemmells have one other child, a girl, who was at school at the time of the crash. Neighbors said Ken and Marie Gemmell had lived in the house for about seven years and were known to dote on their children, who often were seen playing in the front yard. Ken Gemmell had left the house a few hours before the crash. After rushing back, he was led to the home, knowing that his wife and children had not emerged. As the house still was in flames, he stood in front of it, staring blankly for 10 minutes before being led away.

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Montgomery Fire Chief Steve Lohr spoke quietly to him.

“We’re doing everything we can to determine the location of your family,” Lohr told him.

Late Monday, Ken Gemmell had changed his Facebook profile photo to one of his wife, Devon and Cole. Another photo showed him and his wife at a festive occasion. Several friends had posted notes of condolence.

A former colleague of Marie Gemmell, who worked at Davis Construction for a dozen years before taking a job several months ago at a bank, mourned her loss.

“She’s really going to be missed,” Brian Polesnak said of his friend, whose Facebook page said she was a native of New Jersey. “She always loved her family, loved her kids. She always had a smile or a joke.”

He is marrying his girlfriend Saturday and said he had wanted Gemmell to be there.

Alice Crites, Dana Hedgpeth, Luz Lazo, Miles Parks, Michael S. Rosenwald and Julie Zauzmer contributed to this report.

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
Gaithersburg grew and swallowed its semi-rural airpark

In the deadly crash, a plane struck a house in a neighborhood built two decades after the airport opened.



Fatal plane crash in Gaithersburg



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A small jet crashed into a home in Montgomery County, killing 3 onboard and 3 on the ground.

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The house went up in 1982, the growing family moved in 23 years later, and the [airplane crashed into it a week ago](#). All the while, the airport had been just down the road.

The tragedy of six deaths on Drop Forge Lane in Gaithersburg will be blamed on someone or something — an error or a defect that caused the plane to go astray and plunge down on a quiet cul-de-sac — but its root cause may lie in the unfettered expansion that has put some airport runways cheek to jowl with suburban development.

The four-bedroom house at 19733 Drop Forge Lane, with a fireplace, two-car garage and deck in the back, is a bit more than a half-mile from the end of the runway at the Montgomery County Airpark.

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The private jet whose crash set that house ablaze last Monday killed all three on board and a woman who huddled in her second-floor bathroom, desperate to [protect her infant and toddler son](#).

“Yes, the airpark was there first, but now we’re here, too, and this is dangerous,” said Becky Trupp, who moved this year to the Hunters Woods development where the plane crashed. “We have to find a way to coexist, and if we can’t coexist, I think that the safety of a community should take precedence over a hobby.”

VIEW GRAPHIC 

Most accidents at smaller suburban airports are minor miscues that do not cause injuries.

For 30 years, people who live in the neighborhoods that surround the Montgomery County Airpark have been fearful something might happen to endanger them.

For instance, they worried after a single-seat plane crashed 100 feet from the runway, and when a single-engine plane with four aboard crashed in someone’s back yard two miles north of the airpark, and when two people died when a twin-engine plane hit a cornfield a few hundred yards short of the runway.



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All three of those accidents happened three decades ago. A headline in The Washington Post in the aftermath read “[Some critics say it’s an accident just waiting to happen.](#)”

The 1984 article quoted one man who lived nearby: “It’s inevitable that a plane will fall out of the sky.”

[Until a week ago](#), however, nothing so nightmarish as what they envisioned had occurred. Since 1983, there have been 29 airplane crashes at or near the airpark, fewer than one a year. Only four resulted in injuries to the pilot or passengers. In three of them — in 1990, 1985 and 1983 — people on board died. Almost a third of the crashes involved novice pilots working with flight instructors, the sort that aviation investigators refer to as “Oh, s---” accidents that are more likely to cause embarrassment than injury.

“There are a couple of flight schools there. You’re getting buzzed by people learning how to fly,” Trupp said. “They fly quite low. They feel like they’re right at the tops of the trees sometimes.”

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The number of accidents puts the airpark in Gaithersburg about on par with three other regional airports that handle roughly the same amount of traffic in private airplanes.



Several homes were damaged Monday morning when a plane crashed into a house near Drop Forge Lane off Snuffer School Road in Gaithersburg, Md. (Dan Morse/The Washington

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This amusement park classic will bring back some joyous memories

The busier airport in Frederick has averaged a fraction more than one accident a year. Both Leesburg and Manassas experience fewer than one per year.

The number of small-plane fatalities nationwide last year, 379 deaths, was the lowest in decades.

About 110 times since 2000, a small plane has crashed into a building or house, most often near an airport. Those crashes have resulted in more than 120 fatalities, almost all of them the deaths of pilots and passengers.

The highest number of people killed on the ground came seven years ago when a plane owned by NASCAR destroyed two homes in Sanford, Fla.

That number — three dead — was [matched last week](#) when Marie Gemmell, 36, huddled in a second-floor bathroom in a futile effort to save herself and two of her children — 3-year-old Cole and 6-week-old Devin — as a blaze fired by jet fuel raced through their home.

Pilot and business executive Michael Rosenberg, 66, and two colleagues aboard the plane — David Hartman, 52, and Chijioke Ogbuka, 31 — also were killed in the crash.

Suburban growth

There wasn't all that much around in 1960 when the new airport opened 23 miles north of downtown Washington and three miles northeast of Gaithersburg, then a town of 3,847 people.

The county had zoned 137 acres next to it for industrial development and 135 acres nearby for residential development, but in those days there were acres and acres of undeveloped fields surrounding the new airstrip.

The airport hasn't grown much, though the runway is 1,000 feet longer now, but the rest of the landscape has changed dramatically. Between 1970 and 1990, Gaithersburg grew almost fivefold, and the population has reached 60,000.

That growth has enveloped the airpark.

There is a map that tells the story. It is an [aviation chart](#) of the

Washington region, encompassing dozens of airports that range from the mega-big such as Dulles International and Baltimore-Washington International Marshall airports to unpaved landing strips.

Outside of the District, it shades the most densely populated areas in yellow.

Three other airports similar in size to the airpark — in Frederick, Leesburg and Manassas — are just beyond the fringes of the yellow zone. The Montgomery airpark is virtually surrounded by yellow.

“When I came there, I don’t think there were as many houses there as there are now,” recalled Richard C. Bartel, who served as the airport’s manager from 1983 to 1991 and then went on to spend eight years as a crash investigator for the Federal Aviation Administration. “The airport hasn’t really changed a whole lot. It’s the neighborhood that’s changed.”

Life in Hunters Woods

Just to the north of the runway, a brand-new development had been built the year before Bartel arrived, so new that not all of the 448 houses had yet been sold.

It was named for the tract of land that once sat largely vacant: Hunters Woods.

Like so much of suburbia, it was a warren of looping streets and cul-de-sacs. Blue Smoke Drive, Ridge Heights Drive, Alliston Hollow Way, Drop Forge Lane.

Decades before [Ken and Marie Gemmell](#) bought 19733 Drop Forge in 2005, or Becky Trupp moved into 9 Alliston Hollow in January, Bartel had a problem on his hands. The people who had moved into pricey new homes near the airport weren’t happy with the noise or the threat of low-flying planes.

“There was always the possibility of a crash,” he said. “It concerned me for many reasons, for noise abatement and safety.”

While the county’s Revenue Authority, which runs the airport, cautioned in 1984 that people should consider proximity to the airport when buying a home, Bartel said he took steps to protect the new development.

“We adjusted the official traffic pattern so that it would channel traffic over Snouffer School Road,” he said.

Much like airplanes coming into Reagan National Airport are supposed to follow the path of the Potomac River, planes taking off to the north from the airpark are supposed to angle to the right and fly over the road.

If you look to the left as you drive north on Snouffer School Road, you will see the back deck of the house bought by [Ken and Marie Gemmell](#).

Planes planning to land at the airpark aren't bound by the same regulation.

“Arrivals generally came in over the road, but some would come straight in,” Bartel said.

“Straight in” was what pilot Michael Rosenberg [was flying](#) when he crashed last Monday morning, and experts speculate that it may explain what went wrong.

Seconds before he crashed, in his next-to-last radio transmission to other pilots flying in the area, Rosenberg said he was headed for the airpark's runway 14.

“Montgomery traffic, 100 Echo Quebec is 3 [miles] out, straight in [toward] 1-4,” he said, according to a transcript of the air traffic transmissions.

Straight in has a particular meaning to pilots who frequent uncontrolled airports such as the Montgomery airpark. Without the guidance of an air traffic controller, in most cases a plane will fly above the landing strip and then double back for a safe distance before turning again to make a final approach.

In a straight-in approach, the pilot dispenses with that exercise and flies directly toward the runway.

It carries a bit more risk, but there is also risk in making a circular loop in the high-performance twin-engine jet that Rosenberg was piloting.

“That doesn't mean that straight in is a line down the runway, straight in could be any direction, 30 degrees left or right,” Bartel said.

Speculation abounds

The National Transportation Safety Board's investigative report, expected sometime next year, is all but certain to pinpoint what went wrong. But the data from recorders on the plane and the observations of Bartel, another retired FAA investigator and a former air traffic controller suggest a likely answer.

In the last 20 seconds of flight, the NTSB said based on preliminary data from the recorders, the plane slowed to below a safe speed and an automatically triggered recording warned Rosenberg that his plane was on the verge of an aerodynamic stall. That meant its nose was up and tail was down to the point where air flow above the wing was insufficient to keep the plane aloft.

The experts speculate that he had drifted off the centerline path to the runway, banked hard to the left to correct that and didn't ramp up the plane's energy enough to compensate for the reduced speed.

"He overshot the centerline of the approach leg, banked too sharply, losing lift, and crashed directly down," said Glenn Groh, a former Air Force tower controller who is not involved with the investigation but evaluated accounts.

Directly down was Hunters Woods. And the plane was on the outer fringe of the traffic pattern Bartel created to protect the neighborhood 30 years ago.

Becky Trupp sits on her back deck often enough to recognize which planes stick to the correct traffic pattern and which don't.

"It's the exception to the rule that they are doing what they're supposed to be doing," she said.

Did she recognize that the airpark might pose a risk before she bought her home?

"I didn't, and that's shame on me," she said. "I knew the airport was there. I just didn't know that those planes flew over the neighborhood like they do. I had no idea."

She lives two blocks from where Rosenberg went down.

“If he had stayed airborne for a little bit longer, it could have been my house,” she said.

Ashley Halsey reports on national and local transportation.



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MCFRS Fire Marshals have 'posted' 3 homes on Drop Forge Lane, 'Unsafe to Occupy' as result of damage from plane crash



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#mcfrs Capt Mauney & E728's crew observe up close the aftermath of Monday's G'Burg fatal fire caused by plane crash



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U/D - NTSB investigation continues for 12/8 G'Burg plane crash on Drop Forge Ln, 6 people died, damage totaled >\$4mil



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Snouffer School Rd between Goshen Rd and Centerway Rd GAITHERSBURG remains CLOSED this morning for plane crash investigation.

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U/D G'Burg all occupants of the plane have been extricated & in custody of ME - #mcfrs FFs will maintain a firewatch



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19733 Drop Forge La, 3 deaths, including 36 YO female, 3 YO male & 7 week old male; Cause, plane crash; Damage, >\$400K



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19740 Drop Forge Lane received >\$150K damage, no fire, occupants escaped without injury



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19737 Drop Forge Lane (immediately next door) received approx \$50K structural damage, no occupants were home at time



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19700 blk Drop Forge Ln - 6 fatalities, incl 3, 1 adult & 2 children in 19733 Drop Forge Ln, & 3 adult in plane



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Gburg plane crash,mcfrs crews assisting w/ extrication of plane occupants & will otherwise maintain fire watch TONITE



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#mcfrs crews will remain on the scene on Drop Forge Lane in G'Burg to assist MCPD, MSP & NTSB investigators -



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MoCo County Executive Ike Leggett offers his condolences to all those who were impacted by the plane crash today



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G'Burg plane crash NTSB news Briefing momentarily followed by MCFRS & MCPD with updated information & status



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Pete Piringer @mcfrsPIO · Dec 8

G'Burg plane crash has resulted in 6 fatalities, 3 on plane & 3 in house - news briefing shortly



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Pete Piringer @mcfirsPIO · Dec 8

G'Burg Plane crash all occupants of house have been accounted for @MCFRS_FireChief to brief Media w/ NTSB at 430p



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G'Burg plane crash - twin engine jet plane came down near houses on Drop Forge Lane near Blue Smoke Lane



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News Briefing G'Burg Plane Crash at 2p- at least 3 fatalities (plane), several occupants of house are unaccounted for



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UPDATE - @MCFRS_FireChief Steve Lohr will brief media (news conf) at 2p IFO 19700 blk Drop Forge La w/ NTSB, FAA, MCP



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G'Burg Plane crash - MCFRS have fire(s) knocked down, several home were on fire, plane crashed into 1, damaged others



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U/D plane into a house Drop Forge Lane, G'Burg, several house damaged, #mcfrrs FFs involved search, rescue & firefight



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Update plane crash correct address Drop Forge Lane off Snouffer School Rd., Gaithersburg, plane into a house on fire

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Plane crash - 8700 block Snouffer school Road

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