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News

Edgetown Bowl burns

By EILEEN MILLARD

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Firefighters from nine fire districts battled the fire that broke out about 2:30 p.m., Thursday, at Edgetown Bowl, 1330 S. Eastwood Drive. The building was valued at about \$1.5 million, according to Steve Walters, who owns the bowling alley with his wife, Carolyn Walters.

The day of the fire

Carolyn Walters said she had left the bowling alley around 2 p.m. the day of the fire. Her son, Chad Walters, who works at the bowling alley, and employee A.J. Mansfield were preparing for afternoon programming — a Woodstock Recreation Department children's program scheduled for 3:30 p.m. and about 40 high-school-aged bowlers scheduled for 4 p.m.

"My other son, Jason, he works part time for the city, was going by to check the parking lot for (snow) plowing and heard it over the city truck that there was a fire at the bowling alley," said Walters. "He headed back and saw smoke and saw Chad and A.J. running out of the building."

There were three other people in the bowling alley when the fire broke out, Walters said. Everyone made it out safely.

"A.J. called and told me there was a fire in the middle room, where the office, boiler, refrigerator and ice machine were," said Carolyn Walters. "I turned around in my driveway and came back, and there were fire trucks there already. It was already so smoky I couldn't see the building."

"Jason was there and had entered the building and told Chad to leave — Chad has asthma," Walters added. "Jason grabbed the fire extinguisher and tried to put it out, even before the police came. He emptied two extinguishers, but the flames were high, ceiling level, and by then, the officers told him to leave."

"He knew in his heart that it was gone," said Walters.

Woodstock Fire/Rescue Chief Ralph Webster said he was about to leave for O'Hare Airport on vacation when he heard a call about a fire at the bowling alley. "I thought I would pass by and find a small Dumpster fire and give the guys a hard time for not being able to put it out by themselves," said Webster. "But by the time I got to 47, I could see heavy smoke already coming out of the roof."

Steve Walters was on vacation in South Carolina when he learned of the fire. "I was at the 14th hole at Myrtle Beach ... having a great round," he said. "Chad called as he was running out of the building and said, 'Dad, the place is on fire.'"

Walters flew back to Woodstock, arriving Thursday at midnight. "Gary (Castaldo), the Bagel Guy, had a limo waiting for me at the airport," said Walters. Walters said the bowling alley and Star 105.5 radio, where Castaldo works, had collaborated together in the past, hosting karaoke nights at the bowling alley.

A fast-spreading fire

Webster described the bowling alley as a brick and block-walled building with a roof supported by a system of heavy wood trusses designed to span large open spaces. "It's called a bowstring truss," said Webster. "They are also called 'firefighter killers' because they are known for not withstanding fire for long. It's a roof system where when one component fails, the complete systems fails. We witnessed one of the bowstring trusses failing and that caused the collapse of the next two to three. When one failed, a third of the building just went down."

The roof collapse happened about 20 minutes into the fire, said Webster. A decision had been made to not enter the building to fight the fire because of the danger of the roof collapsing on the firefighters.

"If we can't get ahead of the fire, we can't go in," said Webster. "We kept throwing water on it to keep it to a minimum." There was not an imminent threat to adjacent buildings from flame or radiant heat, said Webster, but because there was a light wind, there was a danger of hot debris being carried and possibly starting other structures on fire.

"That's why we had the big ladder trucks there, to keep it down," said Webster.

Route 47 shut down

Woodstock police officers shut down Route 47 between Lake Avenue and Highway 14 for about four hours, Webster said. "There was a lot of smoke and soot blanketing the area," he said. "Firefighters fought an active, blazing fire for about two hours and a smoldering fire for at least another two hours."

Woodstock Fire/Rescue personnel stayed at the site to put out smoldering fires that were starting up throughout the night. "There will probably be spot fires starting up for the next few days," Webster said Friday. "None of any substance, but there will be smoke coming from the roofing material." He added that the site will remain roped off and will be under watch. "If the roof material gets going again, we will go back," Webster said. He added that until a complete fire investigation is finished, no more demolition will occur on the site.

The building was 130 feet by 170 feet, said Webster, "about 20,000 square feet of space. It was a big structure." Webster added that it is easily the largest fire the department has handled in the last 10 years.

"There have been some big fires on the Square, but this is the biggest in the last 10 years," Webster said.

Woodstock Fire/Rescue had about 35 to 40 people on the scene. Out-of-district help brought the personnel count to 70, Webster said. "We brought in Crystal Lake, McHenry, Huntley, Harvard, Marengo and Marengo Rescue, Wonder Lake and Nunda Township," he said.

Webster said there were no injuries, although one Woodstock police officer was taken to a nearby emergency room to be checked for potential smoke inhalation. He was treated and released in good condition, Webster said.

Follow-up and investigation

Fire/rescue squad members were back Friday doing some light demolition, checking for hot spots and assisting in the fire investigation, said Webster. They also helped the Walters retrieve some of their possessions. "There were about 100 bowling lockers there," said Webster. "We wanted to get the customers' bowling balls. Some of them made it through the fire."

As far as a cause of the fire, Webster said Friday, "Right now, it's the mechanical and electrical systems we are looking at." Webster said preliminary investigation did not indicate arson. Because of the high dollar amount involved, many different entities are involved in the investigation, including insurance investigators, Woodstock Fire/Rescue, the state fire marshal's office and engineers from the boiler, electrical and HVAC companies involved with the building's maintenance. Personnel from the St. Charles office of the federal department of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms also assisted, not because of any suspicious fire concerns but because they have expertise in investigating major fires, said Webster.

A concerted effort

The combined fire and rescue districts worked very well together, Webster said. "I want to thank Woodstock police. They were phenomenal with the traffic and instrumental in getting our units onto the scene," Webster added. "They also did a great job helping with the investigation and securing the scene overnight."

Webster said that he was glad he was still in Woodstock when the call came in. "The thing is, I would have been down there, sitting at O'Hare because my flight ended up being delayed, while Edgetown was burning. I was glad to be there to help."

Rebuilding plans

Steve Walters said that their current bowling league season does not end until May and that he has already been in contact with other area bowling alleys to find lanes for his league bowlers to finish their season. "We've had tons of bowling alleys calling to take them in," said Walters.

He added that, before the fire, there were plans to begin work on some improvements to the bowling alley. He said the work had been scheduled to begin March 15 to add an outdoor volleyball court, a beer garden and several horseshoe pits.

Those features will be included in the rebuild, Walters said. "It will be bigger and better," he said. "I've been here all my life — we are committed to serving the community." He added that there has been much community support since the fire. "The calls to rebuild it are in the hundreds," he said.

"This is our life," added Carolyn Walters. "There will be an Edgetown built, and if we can get all our ducks in a row, we will be up and running by the fall league. Our dedication is to get back up and running and say to our league bowlers, 'You have a house to bowl in,' come fall. "This is our life ... we will get it up and running, no matter what."

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