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Empty Cedar Fair buildings being used for training

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A Bainbridge Fire Department firefighter uses a saw to cut through a roof on a building at the now-closed Wild Water Kingdom water park in Bainbridge. Property owner Cedar Fair permits the department to use the buildings for practice.

Photo courtesy of Bainbridge Fire Department

Despite being closed to the public for a good while, Wild Water Kingdom and the former Sea World park on Cedar Fair property in Bainbridge have been seeing a lot of activity.

Firefighters and police have been using the empty buildings in the park off Squires Road for training sessions that offer valuable experiences for real-life situations. Wild Water Kingdom closed in 2016 and the marine park closed in 2000.

Bainbridge Assistant Fire Chief Wayne Burge said the township fire department recently used the site for training. One of the sessions involved using saws to cut through roofs, as they might during a building fire, he said.

“We will be training there quite a while,” Assistant Chief Burge said, and they will continue even into the winter months. Most of the buildings are vacant.

“Other departments use the facility as well,” he said. The Valley Enforcement Group and SWAT team practice there as well, he noted.

The entire Bainbridge Fire Department goes for the mandatory drills, Assistant Chief Burge said.

In the firefighters' recent session, they used different saws, including a circular saw that is battery operated, for cutting through the different roof structures, he noted. The saw is very small and light but still useful in cutting through roofing materials.

“Our new extraction tools are all operated by batteries making them lighter and some of the ventilation equipment is battery operated,” Assistant Chief Burge said.

The firefighters also practiced with a hose line going into a simulated smoke-filled building when firefighters are crawling into dark spaces. They cover their masks so they can't see anything, he said.

“The idea is to simulate a non-visual atmosphere just as you would when going into a structure filled with smoke. If it is black, you can't see. You are just going by feel. We're teaching communication by voice and feel with others. You have to continuously be communicating with other firefighters,” assistant Chief Burge said.

“We were there for a half a day” he noted of the recent practice. They used three different buildings and worked on roofs, including flat and sloped, he said. One roof had sheet metal and one was wood.

"We're planning on going back," assistant Chief Burge said. "It's really hard to find buildings you can do this type of practice in."

Bainbridge Fire Department Captain Gene Martin said the use of the vacant buildings at the former water park has been an invaluable training site for the department.

Cedar Fair has opened the majority of the buildings to a variety of organizations for practices, "including for search and rescue dog training, Bainbridge police and the SWAT team," he said.

"We were over a refrigeration cooler building and cut through the tin, the styrofoam insulation and the interior surface," Capt. Martin said of a recent training exercise. "It was a different saw and cutting technique with a different piece of equipment."

They also cut into a flat roof over a covered seating area that was part of an outside picnic area at the park.

"It was the next best thing to a live burn," Capt. Martin said of the training.

They are progressing into other firefighting scenarios including cutting holes in dry wall between the wall studs to get from one room to another and simulating getting through reduced sized spaces, he said. "It all includes testing, tools and finding your way out," Capt. Martin said.

In many training sessions, the department has to build structures and then rebuild them for additional practice. At the former water park, they can do damage but continue to practice.

Bainbridge Fire Chief Lou Ann Metz said the water park facility has been used off and on for the past few years. Cedar Fair of Sandusky, the owner of the former Geauga Lake Park property, has made it available to different agencies.

"We have started using it on a regular basis, cutting through roofs and doors and working with forceable entry tools," she said.

The Aurora Fire Department and the Urban Search and Rescue Team have also practiced there.

She noted the fire department teams go in and respond to situations that would involve collapse and entrapment and the adjacent Geauga Lake is used by rescue dive teams.

“It is real, live training and important to us to do tasks in a controlled atmosphere. The training value is very high,” she said.

The department was there twice in September, she said.

In the roof operations, they cut holes to ventilate the building so toxic gases can escape, as in real-life situations, Chief Metz noted.

“We’re very thankful to Cedar Fair for their generosity in letting us use the property,” Chief Metz said.

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