

Bowling, Skate Facilities Burn

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The Wilkes Bowling Lanes and adjacent Wilkes Family Skate Center on N.C. 268 East in North Wilkesboro, popular recreational facilities for about 60 years, were completely destroyed in a fire that began late Saturday afternoon.

The skating and bowling lane buildings were rapidly engulfed in one of Wilkes County's largest fires in many years. Only fragments of walls, cinderblocks and twisted metal remained Sunday morning.

An electric transformer exploded and sparked and large plate glass windows were blown across the parking lot. Gary Barrows, a captain with the North Wilkesboro Fire Department, said his firemen immediately turned off large propane tanks outside the skating rink and kept hosing them down to keep them from a disastrous explosion.

Niki Hamby, North Wilkesboro's fire chief and fire investigator for the Wilkes Sheriff's Department, said the fire started around 5 p.m. in the Wilkes Family Skate Center building, possibly from an electrical wiring problem between the ceiling and attic. Hamby said the fire spread rapidly, partly due to the large amount of open space in the two buildings, particularly in the attic areas. The age and dryness of the timbers also played a part in the rapid spread of the blaze.

When firefighters arrived, the blaze was already well on the way to fully engulfing the structure. The blaze quickly was through the roof, Hamby and Barrows said.

Twenty fire departments from around Wilkes County responded to the fire and there were at least 125 firefighters on the scene, Barrows said. On Sunday, there were still 78 firemen at the scene. Fire departments in the county had to cover multiple fire districts while other personnel were tied up with this blaze.

Wilkes Forest Service personnel had to put out a woods fire on Flint Hill Road that had been ignited by the bowling alley blaze. "Their response was very important," Barrows said.

"There is no way we could have handled this fire without the help of the other departments," he said, noting his appreciation for that assistance.

He said it took until around midnight for the roofs on the structures to collapse and allow firefighters to attack the interior of the blaze and get a good grasp on the situation.

Mark and Becky Call managed the Wilkes Bowling Lanes and Jerry and Pam Curry managed the Wilkes Skate Center.

Mark Call and Pam Curry are siblings and the businesses and buildings have been owned by their family since their parents acquired them in the 1980s.

Jim Lowe, co-owner of the first Lowe's Hardware store, started the bowling lanes and skate center and had the buildings constructed in the 1950s.

Call said at the scene Saturday night that there was no insurance on the buildings. He and Mrs. Curry said they're unsure about plans for the businesses now.

Mrs. Curry said there were birthday parties underway at the bowling lanes and the skate center when she saw smoke in the rear of the skating center building and dialed 911. She said the people in both buildings were then evacuated.

Mrs. Curry noted that her son and a friend lost all of their bookwork for a car sales business in the fire. Owners of coin-operated games lost those machines and a large number of tools belonging to someone else were lost.

She said she wanted to publicly thank the firefighters and other emergency personnel who responded and for their efforts with the fire. Mrs. Curry said she wanted especially to thank the people of Wilkes County for supporting the businesses for many years.

Firefighters kept the fire from spreading to other buildings, with one of the biggest concerns being a carwash just east of the fire. N.C. 268 East was closed to traffic in front of the buildings from 5:30 p.m. Saturday to 2 a.m. Sunday, Barrows said. Officers with the North Wilkesboro Police Department and the Wilkes Sheriff's Department were able to divert traffic around the scene, Barrows said.

Over 20 fire departments responded and some fire departments covered multiple districts while the fire on N.C. 268 East was being fought. Two aerial ladder trucks from the Wilkesboro Fire Department and one from the North Wilkesboro Fire Department were used to direct water down onto the fire from above.

The State Bureau of Investigation, Wilkes Sheriff's Department and North Wilkesboro Police Department responded, as well as the Wilkes Rescue Squad, Wilkes Emergency Medical Services and the American Red Cross.

One fireman was overcome by heat, but was given oxygen at the scene and didn't require transport to Wilkes Regional Medical Center.

Firefighters remained on the scene putting out hot spots early Sunday afternoon.