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Smoke clears Ramada

By LORI POTTER, Hub Staff Writer

KEARNEY — A flame used on stage as part of a band performance caused minimal fire damage and no injuries at Ramada Inn early Saturday morning, but smoke throughout the building forced the evacuation of the 209-room motel.

Kearney Volunteer Fire Department Capt. Todd Walton, incident commander for the call at 12:22 a.m. Saturday, said there were many challenges for the 44 firefighters and law enforcement officers who responded.

“There are 209 rooms that had to be searched ... We found one person who was sleeping through that (fire alarms) that they had to wake up,” Walton said.

The responders also were trying to complete several tasks at once: evacuate the building, search for a fire and check the rooms.

“There was smoke in the handling system, so it was dispersed throughout the building,” Walton said. “At first, we didn’t know it was from the performance, so we had to check everything, 209 rooms, conference rooms, the Fundome, kitchen area and bar.”

The focus then turned to Maxwell’s Lounge, where the ’80s band 3-D was performing when the fire alarms sounded.

Walton said that although Maxwell’s was the only place not filled with smoke, that was where the bar manager used a fire extinguisher to put out a residual fire in a metal air duct in the ceiling above the stage.

People who attended the performance also reported that the band used fire in its performance.

The band has performed many times at Maxwell’s in the past three years, and one of 3-D’s trademarks is when lead singer Alan King blows a fireball near the end of the show.

Ben Buchanan, who recently became Ramada’s manager, said he was unaware 3-D’s show included a fireball. “No other band that performs here does anything like that, and if I had known this band did it, I would have put a stop to it before they performed,” he said. “It was an unfortunate thing that happened.”

King was contacted by the Hub for an interview, but he said hotel officials asked him not to comment.

“This was a very small fire that was put out within seconds,” Buchanan said. “The problem was that it hit the circulation motor in the bar and all the smoke was pushed out into the dome.”

The KVFU report says fire extended into an air exhaust duct, causing minimal damage. Walton explained that the smoke from Maxwell’s was taken up into the ceiling and behind the waterfall in the Fundome, where it went into the air handling system and was moved throughout the building.

Firefighters pulled down a few ceiling panels in Maxwell’s to ensure the fire was out.

“In this case, we had a lot of smoke and no fire,” Walton said. The damage estimated listed in the fire department report is \$2,000.



Hub file photo Alan King of the band 3-D performs recently. A flame used in the band’s show caused Maxwell’s Live and Ramada Inn to be evacuated Friday evening because of smoke.

The situation was under control by around 1:30 a.m., he said, because the building had been thoroughly searched. Motel patrons then were allowed back into Ramada's lobby and conference rooms.

Buchanan said guests didn't return to their rooms for more than two hours.

Most firefighters left the scene about 2:30 a.m. after hoses had been rolled up and six positive pressure fans had been used to clear smoke. Walton said he and a couple other firefighters stayed until Chuck Hoffman of Grand Island, an investigator with the State Fire Marshal's Office, turned the property back over to motel officials at 5:46 a.m. Saturday.

"We had a pretty good idea of the chain of events," Walton said, but Hoffman was called in to confirm that KVFD's findings about the cause of the fire were correct.

KVFD Administrator Ken Tracy said this morning he's still researching whether there is a city ordinance concerning the use of fire or pyrotechnics in buildings. "At this time, the city doesn't have one that I'm aware of," he said.

Buchanan said that before the early Saturday morning incident, Ramada Inn didn't have a policy banning the use of fire or pyrotechnics during live performances.

"Now there is a definite policy. No fire, no fireworks or anything that could lead to a fire will be allowed," he said. "The safety of our customers, as well as the entertainers we hire, comes first."

"Our guys did a heck of a job," Walton said, including law enforcement officers and other emergency responders in his praise. "It was a challenge."

He said it can be easy to take fire for granted because it's a tool for daily living. "It makes for great performances ... but there's a reason for the expression about playing with fire."

"I guess that when you play with fire in an atmosphere like that, a lot of things can go wrong," Tracy said, "and not necessarily in hurry. I guess it was more or less a wake-up call."

Hub staff writers Todd Gottula and Katherine Thomas contributed to this story.

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