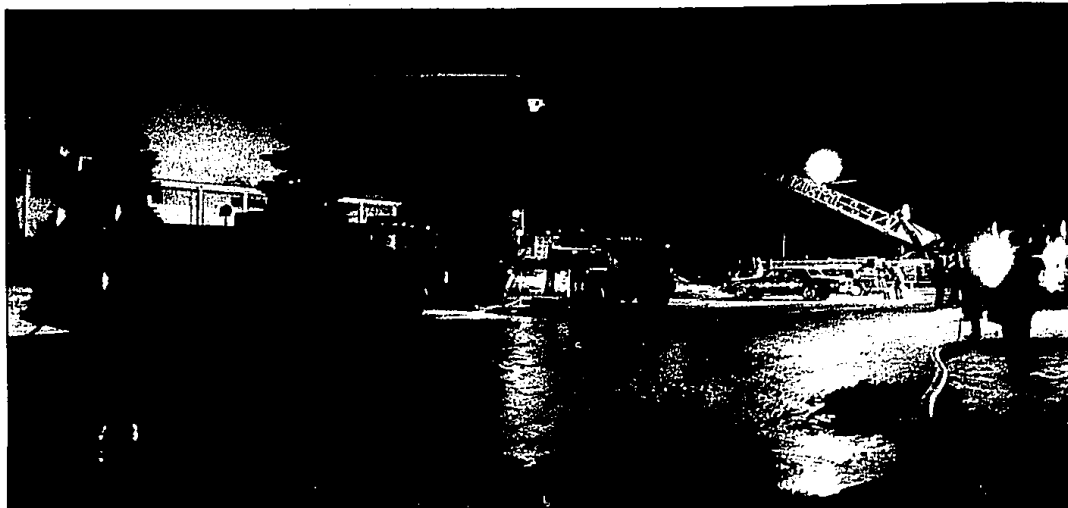


At RIGHT: Firefighters from five communities fought an intentionally set fire at the former Farmington Hills Country Club clubhouse in 9-degree temperatures Sunday. The training burn, under Farmington Hills fire Chief Richard Marinucci's direction, started at 4 a.m. Winter weather, including icy conditions, complicated the exercise. Here, firefighters in an elevated aerial platform use master stream nozzles to spray a large volume of water on the burning structure.



photos by RANDY DORST/staff photographer

'It's the end of an era'

Firefighters use Farmington Hills landmark for training burn

By Bob Sklar
staff writer

MORE THAN an old building slated for demolition went up in flames as Farmington Hills firefighters hosted a five-department training burn at the former Farmington Hills Country Club clubhouse early Sunday.

"It's a landmark," said Farmington Hills city manager William Costick, as flames lapped at the 33-year-old clubhouse and the rising sun peeked through a cloud of smoke billowing into a blue sky.

"It's the end of an era at 12 Mile and Haggerty," added Deputy Chief Peter Baldwin of the Farmington Hills Fire Department.

The golf course closed Oct. 2, 1987, to make way for the Country Club Corporate Park.

The principal occupant of the planned research-office light industrial park will be Nissan Research and Development's \$50-million, 250,000-square-foot headquarters, targeted to open in 1990.

The corporate park, to be devel-

oped by Northern Equities Group of Farmington Hills, will cover 108 of the former golf course's 138 acres. Northern donated the clubhouse for the burn.

"Certainly, people would have preferred to see the golf course stay," said Costick, bundled up as the fire raged in the morning chill. "But the economics of the area didn't dictate that."

"Since the clubhouse otherwise was going to be bulldozed, burning it presented a tremendous training opportunity."

ABOUT 100 firefighters from Farmington Hills, West Bloomfield Township, Novi, Commerce Township and Wayne took part in the burn. All five departments are in the Western Wayne County Mutual Aid Association.

The size of the 20,000-square-foot clubhouse made this the largest training burn ever in Michigan, said Farmington Hills fire Chief Richard Marinucci, Southeastern Michigan Fire Chiefs Association vice president.

The burn fine-tuned Farmington Hills' evolving emergency command system. The system divides an emergency scene into more manageable sectors. Sector officers report to the incident commander.

The burn also identified problems when several departments team up. The need to cooperate increases at natural disasters, like a tornado, plane crash or large fire.

"Our top focus was to keep every-

'Since the clubhouse otherwise was going to be bulldozed, burning it presented a tremendous training opportunity.'

— William Costick
Hills city manager

body safe," Marinucci said amid questions about a Milford training exercise at a vacant farmhouse in October 1987 where three western Oakland County firefighters died.

FARMINGTON HILLS follows National Fire Protection Association standards for training burns. No one was hurt in Sunday's two intentionally set fires.

"We met daily for two weeks to plan for this and made a half-dozen trips to the site. We were very careful in bringing people out — like when the roof was in danger of collapsing," Marinucci said.

If the burn couldn't have been done safely, "we wouldn't have done it," he added. "Of course, there's always a risk with a live burn. But we took all the precautions we could."

"They took a great deal of care in setting the fires and letting them build up," said Farmington Hills Mayor-elect Terry Sever. "I was impressed with their total control, right from the beginning."

"It's better to practice under a

controlled circumstance than face difficulty later," he added. "With development bringing larger buildings, fighting a fire of this size is something you have to prepare for."

DAN LACY, a Farmington Hills firefighter for four years, said the burn helped sharpen on-scene communication. He accompanied district chief Bob Rehtoy into the clubhouse during the second fire.

"We were unfamiliar with the building so the number of levels and rooms on each floor made it easy to get confused or lost," Lacy said.

That's why communication between Rehtoy, who was inside, and Marinucci, who was outside, was critical. "District Chief Rehtoy was able to relay what he saw. When the fire got very erratic, he called for more water," Lacy said.

That kind of communication is vital because firefighters inside a building are "looking into the mouth of flame. You're not looking at the big picture," said station Lt. John Traflet.

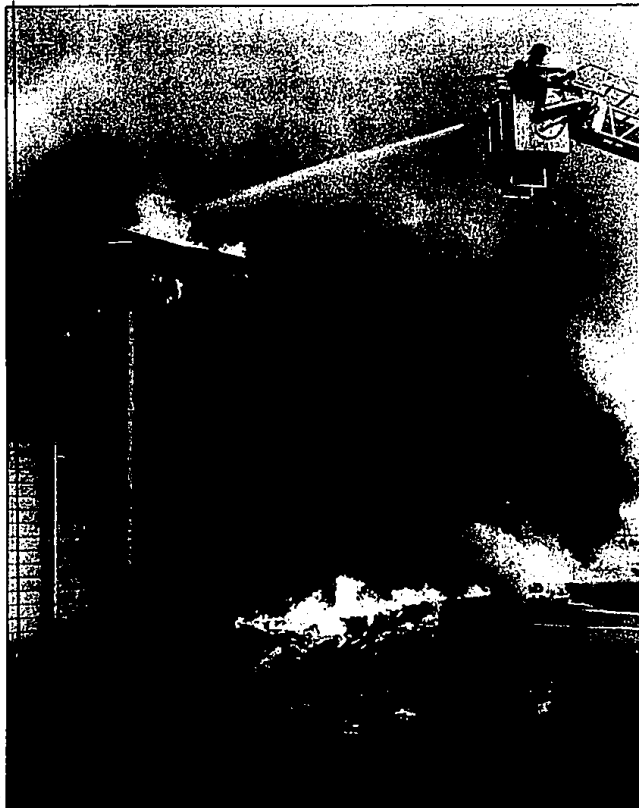
Two safety officers did nothing but watch the flames and keep Marinucci abreast of potential danger — like the weakening overhang.

"You learn something from every training burn," said Lea Strickfaden, a Farmington Hills firefighter for eight years.

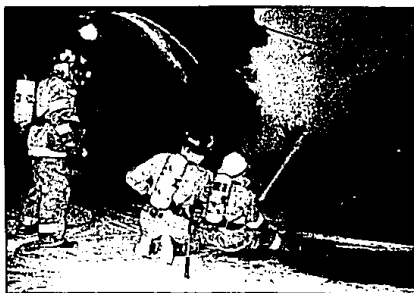
Rookie firefighters, who may have been to just one or two house fires, "got to go inside a burning building — to taste, feel and smell what it's like," added Costick.



District chief Jim Schierloh (left) consults with deputy fire chief Peter Baldwin of Farmington Hills at the command post during Sunday's training burn. The command post is the central location where management decisions are made during a major emergency like a large fire.



Firefighters use an elevating platform to extinguish the remaining fire at the former Farmington Hills Country Club clubhouse during Sunday's training burn.



AT LEFT: Firefighters in full protective clothing, including air packs, train a 2 1/2-inch hose line on the flames spewing from the former Farmington Hills Country Club clubhouse.



Cement block walls and aluminum siding are all that remain of the former Farmington Hills Country Club clubhouse after Sunday's training burn. Firefighters took care to stay away from the overhang on the front of the building.