

# Frozen water pipes can carry chilling damage

By BILL COUTANT  
STAFF WRITER

While sprinkler systems have proven their worth in fire prevention, recent problems with freezing pipes are a reminder that they must be maintained.

"What you see over the holidays is businesses that shut down for a weekend or longer," said Lt. Mike Garr, a fire prevention specialist with the Farmington Hills Fire Department.

"They come back Monday to find that the pipes for the sprinkler system have frozen and burst. There's a phenomenal amount of water that can flow

from one little pipe."

Sadly, some Farmington Hills businesses have found out about water damage the hard way.

In the case of the Honey Tree restaurant in Hunter's Square shopping center at Orchard Lake and 14 Mile, the sprinkling system's pipes were above a dropped ceiling, which allowed them to freeze over the Christmas weekend. In that case the owner had turned down the heat to conserve energy.

Flooding from burst pipes at the Maria Montessori School on 13 Mile over the New Year's weekend not only caused water

damage, but temporarily closed the business, Garr said.

But the cold weather doesn't just hit businesses with sprinkling systems. Because many people leave town for several days during the holidays, there is a risk if they turn the thermostat down too low. A faucet that broke at a residence on Birchcrest Way in Farmington Hills did extensive water damage New Year's night.

Another residence where the underground lawn sprinkling system was not "blown out" before winter weather hit ended up costing a resident thousands in damage to his basement because of

the resulting flooding, Garr said.

Fire codes don't allow businesses to turn off their automatic sprinkler systems except for service, and then only after they contact the fire department.

Businesses should make sure areas where sprinkler pipes are out of sight, such as mechanical rooms, closets and dead space between ceilings and dropped ceilings, are kept above freezing. And investing in an electronic monitoring system of some type can prevent disaster, Garr said.

A strobe light that is activated when the sprinkling system malfunctions is part of the equipment in many newer buildings in Farmington Hills.

"It just tells someone passing by that there is a problem," Garr said.

The cost of such a system minute compared to that of water damage. An office building on Northwestern Highway that was partly vacant and unheated had about \$100,000 in water damage because of a burst pipe about five years ago, Garr said.

"Most of the time the attitude is, 'it can't happen to me,'" Garr said.



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