

Valuable

Training burns are 'very beneficial'

By Bob Skier
staff writer

Since 1983, the Farmington Hills Fire Department has held 29 training burns at donated structures.

Chief Richard Marinucci hopes over-reaction from the deaths of three western Oakland County firefighters in a training burn at a donated farmhouse near Milford Sunday doesn't trigger a ban on such use of vacant structures.

"We've been fortunate and successful in our training burns. They've proven very beneficial to our department. We certainly don't want to lose them," Marinucci said.

"People have been very good at donating properties," Deputy Chief Peter Baldwin said. "We don't want them to have second thoughts. We don't have a lot of structure fires so the practice burns are extremely valuable to us for training."

In Farmington Hills, the fire department and the donor of a structure sign an agreement releasing the donor from liability. After a burn, the donor must remove the rubble and fill in the basement. "So donors really do it more as a community service than for financial reasons," Baldwin said.

Typically, Farmington Hills' part-time firefighters, who are assigned to stations, see a limited number of actual structure fires during a given year. Last year, the department handled 569 fires, 183 involving structures.

DESPITE THE relatively informal setting, training burns still provide a challenge. "You still have the chance to win against a natural element through your own skill and through use of equipment," Baldwin said.

"It's a training function and we want to keep it that way," he added. "But there's a certain amount of realism. We try to teach our people. We try to tell them what they may be doing wrong, or what they should have done a little differently."

For example, Baldwin said, "You don't want to be more destructive than the fire itself. You only want to do what's necessary to suppress the fire. The special burns are where you experiment. You certainly don't want to do that on a \$100,000 home."

Although the fire department's senior officers attend training burns, they are overseen by the district chief and the training officers from the hosting fire station.

"We serve primarily as safety officers," Baldwin said of the senior officers.

Safety officers are responsible for maintaining safety. They have the authority to modify or end a drill at any time.

At controlled burns, Farmington Hills typically has one safety instructor per every five firefighters. Instructors typically are stationed on each floor, at each stairway, at each doorway and on the roof. "All recruits go into the building with an experienced member. And everybody is constantly being accounted for," said Ronald Schwartz, a training officer.

The special burns are in addition to the department's monthly station training and monthly department-wide training. The department also hosts periodic sessions that focus on such specialty areas as emergency medical care, arson investigation, hazardous materials and office training.

FARMINGTON DEPARTMENT of Public Safety has taken part in training burns in Farmington Hills and wouldn't hesitate to do so again if invited, said Deputy Director Gary Goss.

When responding to a fire, the department draws from a roster that includes 22 sworn and 21 reserve officers. Last year, the department responded to 46 fires, 16 involving structures.

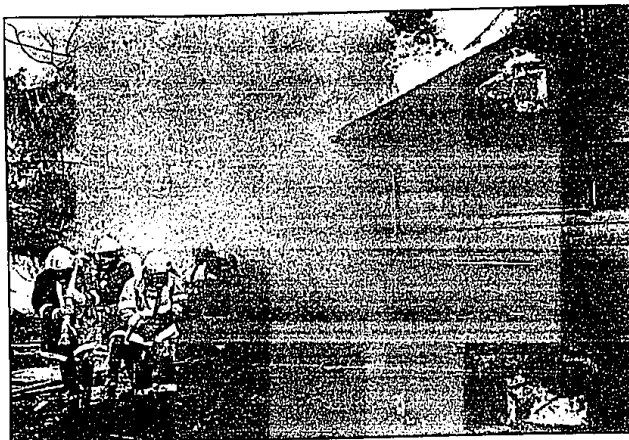
Each public safety officer has more than 132 hours of training and is working toward Firefighter I certification, as established by the Michigan Firefighters Training

Council. The department is working toward assuring that each officer eventually achieves the Firefighter II level.

In addition to monthly classroom sessions, Farmington often smokes up its fire tower at the Department of Public Works. The three-story masonry tower has sprinklers to help in teaching about a sprinkler system's value and use.

But it doesn't replace well-supervised training burns. "Part of a firefighter's job is to go into a burning building," Goss said. "And there's no better way to prepare for that than to do it."

"It's the best type of training you can get — an actual burn. You can talk about it all you want, but fighting a fire is difficult to train for."



Farmington Hills Fire Department trainees relocate an outside hose line during a live training burn at an old house recently.

Training burns: key to skill development

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four firefighters attacked separate fires at an old house donated by a developer. Firefighters, in full gear, entered the two-story house to improve their skills at ventilating a burning building and extinguishing the flames. Each fire was put out before the next was started.

A major reason why building fires are fought from within is "to put us in the position of rescuing anybody who may be inside," Deputy Fire Chief Peter Baldwin said. "Rescue is the number-one priority of fire service. Fire suppression is next in importance."

IN KEEPING with National Fire Protection Association standards for live training burns, no accelerants or flammable liquids are used in Farmington Hills other than during arson training, when extreme caution prevails, Marinucci said. The NFPA is a nonprofit, private agency that writes model national fire codes and training manuals.

Milford police investigators have not confirmed or denied news reports that a mixture of gasoline and

camp stove fuel was used to ignite the multiple sets during the fateful training burn Sunday.

A strong concentration of flammable liquids was allowed to sit for nearly two hours. The house filled with dangerous vapors, which triggered an inferno that engulfed the house when the sets were ignited. The victims were trapped upstairs, according to news reports.

Farmington Hills firefighters have "learned that paper, wood and matches provide the necessary amount of fire in a much more controlled manner," Baldwin said.

THE FEAR of accelerants is their unpredictability. "When you have a training burn, you're trying to control it as much as possible and make the fire as predictable as possible," Marinucci said. "When you inject a flammable liquid, you lose some of that predictability and you lose a bit of that control. You have to be extremely careful when you use those substances because they're volatile and things can happen."

"Fire is hot and it's nasty, no matter whether you're getting paid or

not, or doing it part time or full time," he added. "It doesn't care. It'll sweep through you if you don't treat it with respect."

A safety officer oversees each training burn in Farmington Hills. Training teams either learn the building layout and evacuation routes beforehand or are accompanied by safety instructors who know their way around. Alternate exits are always assured. Backup hoses are always poised, Baldwin said.

Farmington Hills doesn't demonstrate an evacuation signal, as recommended by the NFPA, "but that's something we're now going to look into," Baldwin said.

Care is taken to prepare burn sites "to make sure they're in suitable condition," Baldwin said. "For instance, if wall and ceiling coverings or other materials in a room are too volatile, we may even remove them to prevent a flashback if we can."

A flashback occurs when the temperature in a room reaches the point where the contents ignite seemingly at the same time. Ceiling temperatures can reach 2,000 degrees.

THE MICHIGAN Occupational

Safety and Health Administration only requires fire departments to train firefighters for anticipated hazards.


"But we train our people in the classroom and at practice burns before they even get on a truck," Marinucci said. "We also may have them pull ladders or hoses or work with air packs at an actual fire."

The four most-recent recruit classes burned a house as their final exam.

Farmington Hills firefighters must serve one year of probation and log 132 hours of training before they become certified and achieve a Firefighter I level.

A bill passed by the state House and pending in the Senate would mandate minimum training standards for all new Michigan firefighters, full time or part time, effective in 1988. Part-timers would be required to receive at least 132 hours of training within two years from the Michigan State Police Fire Marshal's Division Firefighters Training Council. The minimum for full-time firefighters would be 264 hours.

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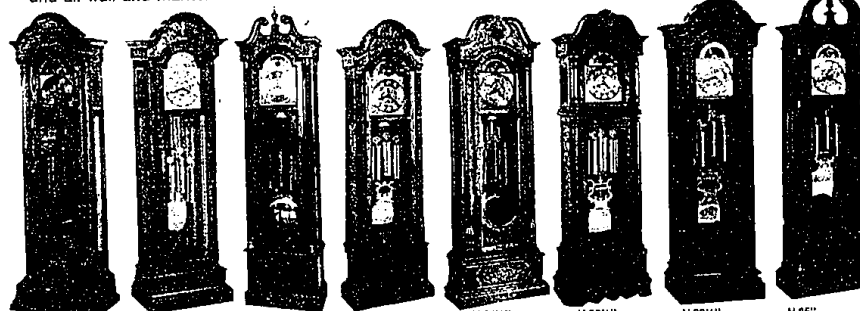
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