

THE SIREN



West Des Moines Fire Department Newsletter

318 5th St. (515) 222-3420 - wdm.iowa.gov/government/fire-department

Message from the Fire Marshal

Routinely in these articles, I discuss development projects going on around our city. One of the more unique projects the Fire Prevention Bureau is currently working on is the major renovation of the Val Air Ballroom. The history of this building goes back to the early 1900's when it was originally built as a tire factory. When the factory closed, the structure was converted into an open-air dance hall that has been an iconic landmark throughout the State of Iowa. Countless concerts, corporate events, wedding receptions, parties, proms, and political events have taken place here, and because of a dedicated new owner, they will continue to do so for decades to come.

I recently walked through the Val Air Ballroom to check in on the renovation progress and have included a couple of pictures in this article from my visit. I can sum up my walk through in one word: awesome! The history of this building could clearly be seen, and the remodel will save and highlight so many of the historical features. Due to the scope of the remodel project, the entire building will be brought up to current fire code requirements that will help ensure a new level of safety for all the visitors who will come through its doors. The Val Air will have a fire sprinkler system, addressable voice fire alarm system, new emergency lighting, and enhanced exit signage. We are so thrilled to be a part of this project and proud of the new ownership for purchasing a large piece of West Des Moines history so its legacy can continue. It is an honor to serve all of you!



Mike Whitsell, Fire Marshal



Val Air Ballroom NE concession area and elevated seating area



2023
Total Incident
Count
1157

March Incident Count - 386

Rescue & Medical – 190	Service Call – 29
False Alarm – 67	Hazardous Condition – 17
Good Intent – 62	Overpressure/Rupture – 2
Fire – 18	Other – 1

Total Estimated Dollar Loss - \$6,880

Total Estimated Dollar Saved - \$2,883,420

Significant Incident Recap



March 1 – Vehicle Fire

Firefighters extinguished a vehicle fire in the 2800 block of University Avenue. The cause of the fire is undetermined. No injuries were reported, and the estimated loss is \$2,300.



March 18 – Motor Vehicle Collision

Crews responded to a motor vehicle collision with multiple vehicles and one that collided into a home at the 100 block of 8th Street. The vehicle that hit the house severed the natural gas line. Firefighters sprayed the area of the of the natural gas line and car to prevent any sparks from igniting the gas. MidAmerica arrived to shut off the natural gas line to the house. The residents were home at the time sleeping in another room on the other side of the house. Fortunately, they were not hurt. The occupant of one of the vehicles was transported to a local medical facility.

In the Community

Station Tour

Station 18 received a special visit from a few members from [Mainstreaming Living](#). They toured parts of the fire station and got to check out the fire apparatus and tools. Thanks for visiting!



DMACC Fire Science Class

Students enrolled in the Fire Prevention course spent an afternoon at the West Des Moines Fire and EMS Headquarters. Fire Marshal Whitsell and Inspector Kinkade discussed the role of a Fire Department Public Information Officer, a firefighter's important job with community education/risk reduction, and the Fire Prevention Bureau's role from concept through construction of structures and occupancies.



Public Safety “All Hazards Drill”

West Des Moines Public Safety Departments conducted an “All Hazards Drill” on the north side of Valley West Mall. This was a collaborative effort between West Des Moines Police, Fire, EMS, and Westcom Dispatch Center.

The exercise was a full-scale critical incident scene, designed to train, gauge, and demonstrate the public safety performance of all departments in response to a significant threat to community safety.

A special thanks to [Valley West Mall](#) for letting us conduct our training at their location.



Keeping You Safe

Spring Cleaning Safety

As we ease into warmer weather and longer days, we would like to remind you to keep safety in mind when starting your spring cleaning and other home projects. Read these tips to help keep you and your family safe.

Declutter Before Deep Cleaning

- Clutter can create fall hazards and make it difficult to complete a deep clean.
- Consider purging closets, junk drawers, toys, tools, and other unwanted items in your home. Sort garbage, recyclables, and donations to make space for a deep clean.
- Clutter can be dangerous especially when it becomes an obstacle for firefighters. Keep pathways in your home clear of clutter especially any obstructions from sleeping areas to exits.

Clothes Dryer Cleaning

- Make sure the air exhaust vent pipe for your clothes dryer is not restricted and that the outdoor vent flap will open when the dryer is operating.
- Move things that can burn, such as boxes, cleaning supplies and clothing away from the clothes dryer.
- Clothes or towels that have come in contact with flammable substances like gasoline, paint thinner, oil (including cooking and massage oils), or similar solvents, should be laid outside to dry then they can be washed and dried or air dried as usual.



Hazardous Materials

- Never mix cleaning products as doing so can create toxic fumes. Read the labels and ventilate your space while cleaning.
- Household cleaning products, chemicals, paints, and poisons should be properly marked and stored securely and away from children's reach. Safely dispose of any materials that are expired, in defective containers or are no longer needed.
- Gasoline and other fuels should be marked clearly, stored in approved containers and in a cool, dry place away from the house and out of the reach of children and pets. Never store gasoline containers in a basement or in the occupied space of a building. Keep them in a detached garage or an outdoor shed.

This Month in Fire History

Ohio State Penitentiary Fire

On April 21, 1930, 322 inmates were killed and 150 injured in a fire at the Ohio State Penitentiary. It is one of the worst prison disasters in American history. At the time of the fire, there were 4,300 prisoners living in the jail which was built to hold 1,500 people.

Construction crews were working on an expansion and scaffolding was set up along one side of the building. A fire broke out on the scaffolding and spread to the roof. Its source of ignition was a candle on a pile of oily rags. The inmates begged to be let out of their cells as smoke filled the cell block. However, most reports claim that the guards not only refused to unlock the cells, but they also continued to lock up other prisoners. Firefighters initially could not get access to the fire because angry prisoners were pelting them with rocks.

The tragedy was criticized forcefully in the press as being preventable. It also led to the repeal of laws on minimum sentences that had in part caused the overcrowding of the prison. Today, candles found in a prison would be prohibited. A modern facility would mandate smoke detectors, guards trained in using onsite fire extinguishers, and there would likely be a network of sprinkler pipes.



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