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Cigarette likely started blaze in Solomons

By Steve Schuster
Staff Writer

Two landmark restaurants were destroyed last week and \$5 million in damage was caused in Solomons because of the careless disposal of a cigarette, according to a team of deputy state fire marshals.

Investigators have determined that the blaze — which destroyed Bowen's Inn and the Lighthouse Inn — began beneath a raised wooden deck walkway adjacent to Bowen's Inn when an accumulation of leaves, dried vegetation and other debris ignited, most likely by a careless discarded cigarette, according to the Maryland State Fire Marshal.

"It was definitely not arson," Deputy Fire Marshall Don Brenneman said Monday.

Brenneman said the Office of the State Fire Marshal first "goes into the investigation with the intent of arson. Then we eliminated all other accidental sources."

Fanned by 45-mph wind gusts, the 12:35 p.m. blaze destroyed the eateries, as well as two small pleasure boats in winter storage on docks adjacent to them. Both wood-frame buildings housed restaurant operations on the first floor and each had a small number of apartments on the second floors. A third building, known locally as Bowen's Hotel, sustained exterior damage from the burning buildings. However, quick action by responding firefighters and an automatic fire sprinkler system kept fire from spreading to the interior, according to the fire marshal's office.

A condominium complex next to the restaurants also was damaged in the fire.

Charles Nava, the assistant fire chief for the Solomons Volunteer Rescue Squad and Fire Department, said when battling fires they must choose either a defensive or offensive approach. In the recent Solomons fire they chose a defensive operation. "We tried to surround the [burning] building with master streams [of water] to eliminate the potential spread of the fire," he said.

Nava said the firefighters tried to "minimize the property damage very quickly, which required large volumes of water." According to Nava, the wind was the biggest challenge for firefighters.

More than 70 firefighters from Calvert, St. Mary's, Charles and Anne Arundel counties along with the U.S. Coast Guard responded. They brought bringing the fire under control in less than two hours. No civilians or firefighters were injured. Several families, however, have been displaced from the apartments and are being assisted by the American Red Cross.

The Southern Maryland chapter of the Red Cross aided six displaced families by putting them up in area hotels for three days following the fire. However, after that, "the community has to step in," Red Cross CEO Mike Zabko said.

The Red Cross has also supplied displaced families with money for food and clothing. Donations for the continued relief effort in Solomons are currently being accepted.

"That's exactly what we need ... financial donations. The Red Cross does not accept goods. So, please do not send linens or clothes," Zabko said.

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