

Memorandum



Date: 22 February 2009
To: PoolSafe Pools
From: New Zealand Recreation Association
Subject: Fire at the Te Rauparaha Arena, Porirua

Hard Day at the Office?

*How's this for a hard day at the office?... a major fire in your facility less than two weeks before schools close for the summer holidays. **Kirsten Malpas** from NZRA dropped by the Te Rauparaha Arena to talk with the people involved in the mop up, as well as to get a tour of the brand new indoor events centre.*

Can you give me a brief summary of the events of the day?

The fire broke out at about 10am on Wednesday 10 December, only about two weeks after the gala opening of the Te Rauparaha Arena that has been built next door to the aquatic centre. At the time the managers were having a meeting in the arena and the first we knew of it the power went out through the entire facility.

The fire was found at the main switch board which is housed within the aquatic centre plant room. Although relatively small, because of its location the fire was being directly fuelled by the main electricity feed into the facility which meant it was very hot.

For Aquatics Manager Doug Sergent, it was doubly heart breaking and frustrating. As a volunteer firefighter, Doug had to watch the fire in the facility he has managed since its opening in 1998, while knowing what needed to happen but lacking the fire equipment to put the fire out.

What is thought to be the most likely cause of the fire?

Three independent investigations are being carried out – one by the Fire Service, one commissioned by the Porirua City Council's insurer and one commissioned by the building's construction contractors. The switchboard was installed just over 12 months ago (still under warranty) during the construction of the arena and is designed to service both the wet and dry facilities.

What is the extent of damage to the facility?

Major! Although the fire was put out fairly quickly, the intense heat within the plant room meant that a lot of gear effectively 'cooked' – PVC piping and wires melted, even metal fixtures started to melt. This led to the aquatic centre being closed for the entire summer holidays which is obviously our peak season. Not a great prospect for anyone, especially the local community who flock to the pools on hot days.

While the arena side of the facility was back to normal within a week of the fire, the aquatic centre is due to reopen on 28 February, 11 weeks after the fire.

How did the emergency response go?

The staff did an awesome job! The Team Leader poolside (Mark) went beyond the call of duty. On the first sign of something not quite right (a big bang), he went to the plant room to turn down the water, gas and power supplies to the facility. At the same time as arriving at the plant room, the heat sensors went off and Mark smashed the alarm panel. Aside from the facility, Mark was the only casualty of the day cutting his finger on the panel glass. The media wrongly reported that there was a person treated for smoke inhalation. The rest of the staff also did a great job with an effective emergency evacuation.

There were about 100 customers in the pools at the time, including casual swimmers, baby and pre-school lesson kids and a special needs group. Fortunately for us it was a fine day so people weren't too reluctant to

go outside. They were wrapped in survival blankets and taken to the museum next door. It was about 1 hour before we had permission to go back inside and get people's clothes; one guy had his clothes in a locker which is electrically powered so he had to wait a bit longer while we got a generator to provide power and open it!

The fire was quickly contained by the Fire Service which sent between 7 and 8 appliances to attend to the incident. The fire fighters had only had a tour of the extended facility 2 weeks before which was a happy coincidence as they were very familiar with the facility.

Our various maintenance contractors really dug deep for us with their response, and we are very grateful for that. Because they were so familiar with the facility, they were able to put their heads together to come up with a solution that got the events centre powered up again within 2 hours and had a longer term temporary board temporary main board installed within 2 days. Then they worked through the weekend to help us bring the rest of the facility (other than the aquatic centre) back on line within the week.

On the insurance front, a quick approval process by Civic Assurance meant that we could get smoke contamination cleaning of the affected areas done quickly so that 1 week later the centre was back up and running with us only canceling a few events. The quick decision of the assessors also allowed us to air freight some plant equipment from Europe over the Christmas break, minimizing our closure time.

What is your position with insurance in terms of what's covered?

Porirua City Council gave a quick assurance that it would look after the staff that had committed to working at the centre over the summer holidays. All staff were relocated to other parts of council or loaned out to other pools.

Our insurance is covering the reinstatement costs involved in getting us up and running again and the business continuity cover includes payment of lost revenue (based on the previous year's summer, meaning in effect we are not suffering financially as a result of the fire). This has acted as an added incentive for the insurer as it's most cost effective for them to get us opening as quickly as possible. Our excess is \$50,000, but considering that the claim will be between \$700 000 \$1 million that's not a lot in the big scheme of things.

What strategies do you have in place when you reopen?

Where possible, we've relocated our regular bookings and swim school customers to our other pool at Cannons Creek. We are starting to call customers on our database to let them know of our reopening now that we have a firm date. Local media will also spread the word. There is no doubt that it will take a while for us to return to where we were at the same time last year, but we'll get there.

In terms of staff, we have been mindful of the need to keep them fully informed so that they are still with us when we're ready to reopen. We have held fortnightly paid full staff meetings which have also allowed staff to feel involved in the progress.

Has there been a silver lining?

The support from the local community has been outstanding, with people really feeling for us in our predicament. Council staff have also helped us out wherever they can, and other pools in the area have gladly borrowed our staff!

As we were due for a 2-week maintenance closure this coming winter, we have been able to bring forward some scheduled maintenance during this time. As much as possible we want to present a revamped facility which will be noticed by the public, starting with a new floor surface throughout.

Although you wouldn't wish it on anyone, the real life emergency allowed us to test and confirm that our emergency procedures worked well.

Our opening day is going to be a fundraiser for Habitat for Humanity which builds houses for in need families. Staff will be donating their time to work that day, and all proceeds will go to the charity so some people will benefit from the initial bad incident.

What advice would you have for other aquatic or recreation facilities?

1. Without a doubt, the fact that the fire door linking the arena with the aquatic centre was closed at the time saved our 2 week old arena. DON'T be tempted to chock back your doors!

2. If you can avoid it, don't put a major switch board in a plant room!
3. Make sure your local fire service is familiar with your facility, especially if you have had major changes to the building. During the facility tour with the fire fighters, they pointed out that the arena construction meant that the fire crews had to run the hoses a long way to the fire.
4. Provide as much information to the Fire Service when you make the first 111 call.
5. Make sure staff have a current knowledge of shut off valves for water, gas and power.

Events Centre

On a positive note, the Events Centre opened in November after 7 years of consultation and 18 months of construction. The initial driver of the facility development was a 30-year-old recreation centre reaching the end of its life in terms of building standard and capacity.

The debate about the \$17.5 million spend was resolved on the undertaking that the development would be funded 1/3 from external funding, 1/3 from the sale of a block of land by Porirua City Council and 1/3 from loans funding. This funding target was achieved and Te Rauparaha Arena opened in November.

The Arena is designed to be a local, regional, national and International facility, both as a sports centre and as an events centre:

Main Stadium

With a floor space of 2495 square metres, it can be configured to cater for

- Banquets seating up to 1500 people
- Concerts seating up to 3000 people
- Sporting events seating up to 2500 people
- Exhibition space

Secondary Stadium

Adjacent to the main stadium is a secondary stadium with a floor space of 857 square metres. This stadium can be used as a warm up facility for major sporting events or a venue for smaller events.

- **2 Meeting Rooms**
- **Theatrette with 80 seats**
- **Dance Studio with sprung floor**
- **Fitness Centre**
- **Sports Medicine Clinic**
- **Cafe**