

THE BLADE

One of America's Great Newspapers

July 31, 2002

Pandora school fails test of winds

By **STEVE MURPHY**

BLADE STAFF WRITER

Four months after construction began, the new Pandora-Gilboa School is in ruins after a fierce thunderstorm toppled its concrete walls Monday night.

Wind gusts of at least 40 mph blew over three of the 42-foot-high walls for the school's gymnasium and knocked down some of the 30-foot-high walls for the building's elementary classroom section.

"It looks like a bomb hit it," said Don Green, construction site manager for RTBM of Pandora, the general contractor.

No one was hurt, but Pandora Fire Chief Bob McCoy said about half a dozen masonry workers fled the half-built gym just before the storm hit about 5:30 p.m.

"They got out just a few seconds before the whole thing fell apart. ... These young men and women working out there were very fortunate," he said. "They were on the ball, and they were bailing."

The same storm, which tore through eastern Putnam County with strong winds, heavy rain, and lightning, caused a tree limb to fall on a Pandora man as he scrambled out of his car Monday evening. Richard Rupert, 45, of East Avenue was treated in St. Rita's Medical Center in Lima for a broken nose, whiplash, and cuts that required about 30 stitches, Chief McCoy said.

Yesterday, chunks of concrete covered the school site, which is north of State Rt. 12 and east of Putnam County Road 6, just west of Pandora. Bulldozers and trucks were brought in to scoop up the debris and haul it away.

Nate Neuenschwander, construction manager for RTBM, said officials were waiting for a structural engineer to arrive at the site this morning and assess the damage.

"We really don't know the total extent of it at this time," he said.

Mr. Neuenschwander said the masonry workers at the site Monday evening were removing scaffolding from the gym when the storm struck.

"They had just completed those gym walls earlier in the day," he said. "The workers on site have a lot of pride in what they do, and to see it all come down, as they did, is very disheartening."

Construction and school officials said it's unclear how much the damage will delay the school's opening, which was planned for December, 2003.

"We're just grateful no one was hurt," school board member Dennis Warren said. "We're thankful for that, but it puts us quite a ways behind schedule."

Mr. Warren said workers were preparing to begin adding the gym's roof.

"We were so close on the gym," he said. "I think if we had had the trusses up, we would have been in better shape. But 41 feet high and 100 feet long, it's pretty hard to hold that in the wind."

The district began construction in March on the school, which is to house students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade.