

For Innovation in Reconstruction...

By Patricia L. Harman

Restoration firms encounter hundreds of different perils every day, but what distinguishes a winner of the Phoenix Award from more traditional restoration or remediation projects may not be apparent when a company first arrives on the scene. This year's winner of the Phoenix Award for Innovation in Reconstruction encountered a little water damage — about 110,000 square feet of it in the Columbus Convention Center in Ohio.

The Convention Center opened in 1993 and completed a \$77 million 300,000 square foot expansion in 2001, growing to nearly 1.7 million square feet of space. It was this northern section of the Convention Center that was affected when the end cap blew off of a 16-inch water main, allowing water to rush into the building through doors, the foundation and any other entry point imaginable.

Columbus has nearly 4,000 miles of pipeline that runs throughout the city, and drawings used by the architects and other project planners working on the expansion showed the water main ending under the sidewalk in front of the building and not beneath the convention center itself. When the endcap burst at 4:30 a.m. on January 9, 2008, everyone found out otherwise.

Security footage of the event shows the water rapidly spreading throughout that wing of the building. First responders on the scene were concerned about the structural integrity of the building because of the force with which the water entered and the ensuing damage. There was enough pressure to dislodge large sections of the concrete floor and ram structural columns into the ceiling of the Convention Center.

By the time the Columbus office of Belfor USA (www.us.belfor.com) arrived on the scene, water was running out of every door in the building, spilling onto the sidewalks and streets. City work crews began repairing the broken main about 9 a.m.



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that morning. After the water was finally turned off, it was time to get down to the serious business of drying out the structure.

One of the major concerns for the Convention Center management was how soon the space would be available for use since the national show for Longaberger Baskets was scheduled to begin, and product displays were already set up. “We had one of our larger shows of the year scheduled to open the following day,” explained Craig Liston, regional general manager for SMG/Greater Columbus Convention Center. He says his first response upon seeing the damage was, “What will it take to make sure that happens and can we muster the equipment necessary to dry out the facility as much as possible?”

In response to the second question, Belfor brought in truck-mount units from three offices in Ohio, as well as Indiana, Michigan and Pennsylvania. The extraction process took the balance of that day and night, and continued through to the evening of the 10th.

Since sections of the Convention Center were severely damaged, a crew of 150 people arrived onsite to set up the drying equipment, begin demolition of the construction materials, and erect a

partition wall that would separate the most damaged areas from the rest of the building. The company’s goal was to have a portion of the Convention Center ready to host the Longaberger Basket show the morning after the flood.

This would be no small task since silt and water had run into the meeting rooms that already had tables full of baskets and other displays. Cleaning the mud from the concrete floors and in the meeting rooms proved to be a bit of challenge. One team went to work using squeegees and shovels to push the silt from one end of the room to the exits. Then the floors had to be mopped, the carpets extracted and everything sanitized.

And there were still large portions of wet drywall and insulation to contend with throughout the facility. Add to that the fact that the Convention Center couldn’t shut down any of the meeting rooms during the drying or demolition process.

Once the walls were flood cut in the affected rooms, curtains were erected to hide the damage until crews were able to come in and complete the reconstruction. All of the drywall and painting was done after hours to avoid disrupting the various events being held at the Convention Center.

Remarkably, the Convention Center was ready to host the Longaberger Basket convention the next day. The response from Belfor and the Convention Center staff played a large roll in getting the building back into operation. “All of our staff, even the ones who were told not to show up for work that day, all came in with the attitude of “What can we do to help?”” said Liston. “One of our administrative assistants even brought her own squeegee to help. It was a total team effort that resulted in getting the building to a point where we could open the next day for a major event. The thought was never, ‘Can we do it?’ It was always, ‘How much time do we have to get this done?’”

One of the biggest challenges was still to be addressed — the removal of nearly 15,000 square feet of concrete, filling the sink hole created by the flooding, repairing the electrical service in that area of the building and then repouring the concrete floor. In a perfect world, these activities would have been done outside with plenty of light and fresh air. The reality was that it basically had to be done in a large meeting room.

“The concrete took approximately two weeks to remove,” explains Scott Halliwill, Belfor’s project coordinator. “The concrete was six-inch reinforced concrete, and was saw cut into 2x2 squares. All of the cutting had to be done at night and only at certain times when the building was not occupied. The 2x2 squares were all manually removed and hauled outside to concrete recycle containers. The container hauling trucks also had to keep personnel working around the clock due to the limited area for the containers.”

The Convention Center, located in the heart of downtown Columbus, resembles a small village with approximately 250 employees, restaurants and a constant buzz of people traveling in and out of the building. Work could only take place during the limited off hours.

Repouring the concrete slab would take three months, since most of the work was done at night with a large crew and exhaust fans. A concrete pumping truck was placed at the curb outside of the Convention Center and the new concrete was pumped across the floor to the targeted area. There would be three different pours handled in this manner.

One of the criteria for winning the Phoenix Award includes identifying the cost savings and innovations used on a project. The entire project would cost over \$3 million to complete and the work was done in phases over a span of 150 days.

Getting the Convention Center cleaned up and dried out in order for the Longaberger show to go on as planned saved the Convention Center what could have been \$100,000 in lost revenues just that first week. Performing the work at night and during off hours so other events were not affected saved the venue even more.



Less than 50 days after the water intrusion, the world’s largest health and fitness event would bring 17,000 participants to the Convention Center. A partition wall with a sloped roof was built and painted to match the multiple colors throughout the building, and the event went on as planned.

It was the collaboration between SMG, the company that manages the Convention Center for Franklin County, Belfor and Travelers Insurance that made the project run as smoothly as it did.

Liston said he was somewhat surprised at how long the restoration process took. “Drying out the facility happened in a matter of hours for the most part... The rest of the project such as replacing acoustical wall covering... and replacing the concrete floor and wall took months.”

The final carpet installation actually took place almost six months after the initial damage occurred. Halliwill says he thinks the biggest challenge was “performing all of the work in a working building, from the thousands of square feet of dry-wall, which mainly had to be done at night, to the concrete removal and repainting of the whole facility.”



Interestingly, it was the removal of the concrete and the reinstallation that he believes went more smoothly than he would have anticipated. “It was the first time for me personally to have to remove that amount of concrete indoors and repour and finish it all indoors. We were able to perform all [of those] phases without a hitch.”

Liston has some recommendations for other facility managers who might find themselves in an unexpected catastrophe situation. “Know your market and where to go for support in case something happens. Within an hour of being allowed back into the building after it was determined to be structurally sound, our operations department had at least 100 fans and blowers on the carpet to try to begin the drying process. That immediate response, I feel, was the difference between being able to open the building the following day or not.”

The RIA Phoenix Awards highlight the value of restoration and reconstruction, and the importance of training, preparation and the ability to handle even the most challenging projects. For Belfor, Halliwill believes it shows that the company “can tackle any restoration project put in front of us.” ■

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Editor’s Note: The deadline for the 2009 Phoenix Awards for Innovation in Restoration and Reconstruction will be December 15, 2009. Any project completed in 2009 is eligible. Entry forms are available at www.restorationindustry.org.