Cigarette Smoker Triggers Evacuation of Courthouse

By Terry Witt
Senior Staff Writer

A careless smoker was blamed for triggering a fire alarm that forced the evacuation of the entire Levy County Courthouse last week.

County Coordinator Fred Moody said Construction Manager Jimmy Jones and his assistant Chuck Jones investigated the cause of the fire and both smelled cigarette smoke in the handicapped-accessible elevator near the courthouse entrance.

"We just think the smell was there; someone lit up in the elevator," Moody said.

Courthouse employees locked up their cash drawers and filed out in orderly fashion with members of the public, but bailiffs stayed behind in keeping with the courthouse evacuation plan.

The evacuation plan calls for employees on the north end of the courthouse to exit through emergency doors near Courtroom A and walk to the Methodist Church. Employees on the south end exit through the security point and walk to First Baptist Church.

Moody said some of the women were upset about the alarm going off. It wasn't known whether the alarm was the result of a bomb or a fire, but it turns out neither was the case.

"This was real. It wasn't a drill," Moody said. "You take it seriously because you don't know what it was."

There were suspicions at first that construction workers on the second floor of the courthouse may have accidentally triggered the alarm, but Moody said that proved not to be the case.

When the courthouse was found to be safe, bailiffs walked outside and announced that employees would be allowed to return first, and then visitors to the courthouse.

The evaluation, as it turned out, occurred on a cold winter day. Moody believes the evacuation happened on Thursday.

He wasn't certain whether court was in session when the alarm sounded.