

Event Type: Company picnic

Incident: Structural failure/weather related

Narrative

On Saturday, August 18, 2007, a corporate picnic was held in Valdosta, GA at an area amusement park. The amusement park was in operation for close to 7 years. It had built a picnic pavilion to respond to demand for rental space for outdoor events. It decided to build a 60'x40' structure in the third year of operation. The picnic pavilion was in its fourth year of operation and had hosted numerous successful events. The structure accommodated approximately 30 aluminum bench tables that comfortably seated 8 adults. The pavilion was near the parking lot and had access to the park via a side entrance.

On the afternoon of Saturday, August 18, 2009, a group of 200 adults and children were attending a company picnic at the pavilion. It was a catered event. Afternoon storms were a common occurrence for this time of the day and year. An afternoon thunderstorm was expected on this day as well. The amusement park had a weather station and monitored it throughout the day. The person responsible for monitoring the weather for the day observed a storm front moving in, but passed it off and went to dinner. About 10 minutes later a tornado touched down and leveled part of the town. Debris and wind caused significant damage to the picnic pavilion. The designated weather monitor was unable to alert the guests of the picnic or the park guests. The debris and wind crushed part of the picnic pavilion. A middle aged woman was unable to find appropriate shelter and was found in a semi-crouched position crushed between a structural pole and a stone retaining wall. It was later determined that the pavilion was not permitted, did not have any specs or records of inspection. There was a pre-determined location for guests to use as a shelter during storms. The employee responsible for monitoring the weather was having his lunch in it.

Problem statements

- How does a pavilion get built without permits being pulled? Who is to blame for this? Should they have known better? Why or why not?
- Who should have performed the inspection(s)?
- Should city officials and inspection agencies be held partly responsible for this situation? Why or why not?
- What should they have been looking for?
- What should happen to the employee (he was on his scheduled break)?
- What was the responsibility of the theme park operator to the guests?
- Should a policy or procedure be in place addressing staffing and emergency procedures? What should they say?
- What should you do for the victim? Who should do it? Why?
- What should you do for the guests that witnessed the incident?
- Should the park be allowed to continue to operate? Why or why not?
- Write a press statement defending your actions as the theme park owner...