

Investigation continues into walkway collapse at Horseshoe Casino

Hammond – State and federal authorities are conducting a joint investigation into how an enclosed walkway at Horseshoe Casino collapsed Tuesday morning, sending several construction workers into Lake Michigan and injuring one.

The U.S. Coast Guard and the Indiana Occupational Safety and Health Administration are expected to determine today which agency will lead the investigation, said Jeffry Carter, Indiana's deputy commissioner of labor.

„It had the potential to be very serious,“ he said of the accident, which occurred at 7:45 a.m. and sent one worker to St. Catherine Hospital in East Chicago where he was released after receiving treatment for scrapes on his back and arms.

Mike Summers, the president and business agent for Iron Workers Local 395, said 10 workers – eight from Local 395 and two who are piledrivers – were on a barge beneath the walkway when it collapsed. He said each wore a flotation device and carried about 80 pounds of tools, including wrenches, sledgehammers and bolts.

The workers decided to jump into Lake Michigan after they felt the barge kick back and the shorings give way, Summers said. After the collapse, six iron workers on a barge stationed beneath another walkway jumped in to the lake to rescue their co-workers, he said.

„I don't know if they could have gotten away from (the tool belts) once they hit the water if they hadn't been wearing flotation devices,“ Summers said. „I'm sure we would have had people possibly drown if they hadn't had them on.

„This day could have ended badly. We could still have been looking for people in the water.“

Hammond Police Chief Brian Miller said two construction workers initially were trapped by the collapse, but were freed from the wreckage by Hammond emergency personnel.

The walkway is one of two that will connect the Horseshoe Casino pavilion on the east to the new, nearly USD 500 million gaming boat on the west. Officials don't think the accident will hamper plans for the gaming boat's Aug. 8 opening.

„A full engineering review is under way and Horseshoe Casino has taken measures to ensure the safety of the on-site construction staff as they move forward with completing this USD 500 million project,“ read an e-mail statement signed by a Horseshoe Casino representative.

The accident occurred as six tugboats pushed Horseshoe's new gaming boat closer to its docking place.

Iron workers were on-site to connect the ends of the 40- to 50-foot long, 100-ton walkways to the casino and pavilion, Summers said. Each walkway was positioned on a separate barge, and as the casino was brought toward the pavilion, the metal bracing holding up one of the walkways failed, he said.

The east side of the one-story walkway tilted at a sharp angle before dropping about 20 feet into the water.

„It seems like as they lowered the walkway the hydraulic shafts on the shoring dropped, and the barge kicked out from under the shoring,“ Summer said, adding work to find why the shorings failed began immediately.

Hammond fire crews arrived shortly after the accident, and all but one worker had been pulled out of Lake Michigan, said acting Capt. Rob Rycerz of the Hammond Fire Department's north battalion.

„It was just a matter of knowing how many people were in the water and if they were all accounted for,“ he said.

In addition to Coast Guard and IOSHA investigations, the union and the company in charge of the project – Chicago-based Pepper Management – will conduct its own investigations.

„Pepper Management is very safety minded,“ Summers said. „All we have to do now is figure out what happened. ... There are a lot of people involved to learn what happened and make sure it won't happen again.“

The management company brought in a dive company Tuesday to take underwater photos of the accident site and to see if air bags should be placed beneath the walkway, which must be removed before work can proceed, Summers said. A 500-ton crane also is being brought in to move the walkway, he said.