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CASE STUDY

Pensacola State College | Pensacola, FL

Custom-made Smoke Vents Help College Recover from Hurricane

Hurricane Sally roared through the Florida Panhandle in September 2020, bringing a path of destruction that caused an estimated \$7.3 billion in damage. The region between Pensacola, Fla. and Mobile, Ala., was especially hard hit, with some communities receiving as much as 36 inches of rain.

Pensacola State College absorbed its share of the impact. Just a few months after the pandemic hit, forcing significant changes in school operations, the administration faced another crisis. Thirteen buildings at the college suffered partial flooding. "It wasn't good," President Ed Meadows said about the impact of the storm on the college after the hurricane hit. "I'll be thankful to see 2020 go by."

Ashmore Auditorium was one of the buildings impacted by the hurricane. Flooding reached as high as four feet on some buildings, but strong winds damaged the roof as well at the auditorium. "The entire roof needed to be replaced," said Chris Nicholas, Senior Project Manager for WB Williamson Bros. The contractor was hired by Charlie O'Connor, General Manager of BELFOR Property Restoration for the roofing project.

WB Williamson Bros. has served customers for four generations in Florida, and its team finds few construction surprises anymore. This project, however, included some unusual hardships.

The most challenging centered around the auditorium's smoke vents. "We weren't aware the size of the existing smoke vents was no longer being made," Nicholas said.

The original plan requested two smoke vents, each 16 feet by 8 feet. When contractors realized the opening required a different size, BILCO's outside sales representative, Waldo Brothers, worked with BILCO's engineering team and Williamson Bros. to find a solution.

The company custom-made three 4-foot, 8-inch x 8 feet smoke vents. The vents were spliced where hinges meet between the three units. The new vents were able to provide the auditorium with the venting necessary to meet code requirements. They were chosen because of the job application above the auditorium, which hosts concerts, plays and other events throughout the year.

"It took quite a considerable amount of time and planning to make sure everything went well," Nicholas said. "We thought OK, we'll put up a couple of hatches, no big deal. But that wasn't the case at all."

The Williamson Bros. team faced other issues with the smoke vents. Workers needed to cut the existing vents apart by hand to remove



them. Wires, ropes, and pulleys inside the auditorium for theatrical performances prevented workers from installing scaffolding to assist with installation.

While most of the roofing project was business as normal, the smoke vent removal and replacement posed some difficult challenges that were solved with ingenuity and teamwork.

"Sometimes when we get a special order, as we did in this case, it's very difficult to get something right," Nicholas said. "Just about anything can go wrong. We worked with a great distributor, and we were pleased with their service. They delivered when they said they were going to deliver, and it worked out extremely well."



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