

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Falling light pole concerns Uniontown school

By Liz Zemba

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The Consumer Product Safety Commission has started an investigation to determine the cause of toppled light poles at sports stadiums in several states, including one last week in Fayette County.

An 80-foot light pole fell onto bleachers April 20 at Bill Power Stadium at Uniontown Area High School.

The stadium was empty and no one was hurt, but school board President Kenneth Meadows said the district decided to take down the remaining three light poles and conduct its own investigation into the cause.

"They took the poles down because of the possibility of the risk of them falling," Meadows said. "The poles were built to withstand 100-mph winds, but wind gusts were only in the 40s when it fell."

Rob Smalley, building and grounds director, did not return phone calls Tuesday seeking comment on the status of the poles' removal or the investigation.

Meadows estimated the cost to install the four poles in 2003-04 at \$100,000.

Citing news reports of similar incidents in other states, Kathleen Reilly of the Consumer Product Safety Commission yesterday confirmed an investigation into the cause of the toppled light poles.

An investigation by the Austin American-Statesman newspaper in Texas found 13 light poles designed and manufactured by the same Fort Worth companies had toppled over the past three years in Texas, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi and South Dakota.

The newspaper reported that another 80 poles nationwide had been removed or had supports added to prevent them from falling. All of the poles, including the ones in Uniontown, were designed by Whitco Co. LLP and manufactured to Whitco's specifications by Makers Co. Inc., according to the newspaper.

Reilly said the safety commission's engineers will examine the poles' construction and installation to try to determine why they failure.

Because Whitco declared bankruptcy in 2006, Meadows said it's uncertain whether the district can recover its losses through the company. It might have to turn to its insurance carrier, he said.

"I'm hoping this isn't going to be an expense we'll have to incur as a district, but we have to replace them," Meadows said.

Charles Machesky, school superintendent, did not return phone calls seeking comment.

Liz Zemba can be reached at lzemba@tribweb.com or 724-836-6646.