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Company's rivals question durability of cover for Cowboys facility

BY BARRY SHLACHTER
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Questions continue to loom over the weekend collapse of the Dallas Cowboys' 88,000-square-foot training center that left 12 people injured, one paralyzed below the waist.

Some in the soft-shell building industry wondered why the membrane skin needed replacing in 2008 after just five years of use — what they said was about half its expected lifespan. Others questioned why Cowboys management reportedly handled the general contracting for installing the new covering.

"It doesn't make any sense," said Jan Ligas, president of Arizon, a St. Louis-based rival maker of fabric-covered structures, including athletic facilities. "I don't think anyone is going to spend \$4 million on a facility and the skin lasts five years.

"This isn't standard in the industry," continued Ligas, whose views were corroborated by officials of two other manufacturers. "I don't know anyone that promises less than a 10- to 15-year life, some go 20 or higher. The minimum is 10."

Neither the Cowboys' management nor Summit Structures of Allentown, Pa., and its sister company, Cover-All Building Systems of Saskatoon, Canada, which supplied the DuraWeave-brand polyethylene covering, would explain why the fabric was swapped out last year.

City of Irving records do not show the Cowboys requested the training center roof be inspected after it was replaced, although city code requires it, Gary Miller, the director of planning and inspections, told The Associated Press. Miller did not respond to calls Tuesday.

But Irving Mayor Herb Gears said he has never found the Cowboys to cut corners.

"What's consistent with the Cowboys is that they handle business in a professional way and do everything first-class. They don't put their employees in harm's way."

Gears added: "We've got to make sure it never happens again."

By supervising the cover replacement, the team likely is assuming at least some liability for the project, noted Nur Yazdani, chairman of the civil engineering department at the University of Texas at Arlington. Yazdani said that fabric-covered structures are designed to meet the same code requirements for withstanding wind as brick-and-mortar buildings, which means gusts of 90 mph in North Texas.

The National Weather Bureau said it estimated winds

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Mark Oyer of Universal Fabric Structures of Quakertown, Pa., said while Summit promises a 10-year life for its polyethylene fabric, he's gotten reports that it has had to be replaced sooner in cases, sometimes after 3 or 5 years.

That said, the metal structure should be able to survive rips in the fabric, said David Nickerson, president of Maine-based Rubb Building Systems, another manufacturer.

Nickerson described Summit as a keen competitor with aggressive pricing whose staple fabric costs a fraction of what high-end makers use to achieve two-decade longevity.

Moreover, Summit's contract guarantee only covers the replacement of the fabric, not labor costs, which can be many times higher, he said.

"Yeah, they give you materials, but you have to pay for the installation," Nickerson said in a call from Sanford, Maine. "Or you can buy the right material up front and it will last 20 to 25 years."

Nickerson said his company has lost a number of projects because it couldn't come close to matching bids by Summit. "Just look at their fabric. Ours costs four times more, and we use three times more steel."


He and others in the industry stressed that aside from the Irving collapse and another at the port of Philadelphia in 2003 also involving a Summit structure, such mishaps are rare for fabric-covered facilities.

"What's really unfortunate here is that people got hurt and that didn't need to happen," he said.

BARRY SHLACHTER, 817-390-7718



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djh wrote on 5/6/2009 7:33:59 PM:
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