

Vandals burn new Woodridge park's play station

By Don Grigas

Staff writer

Woodridge police have taken three youths into custody in connection with a fire that destroyed playground equipment Sept. 9 at recently opened Windy Point Park at Egerton Drive east of Interstate 355.

Carrie Noe, spokeswoman for the Woodridge Police Department, said an officer "working the street" identified one of the youths from images captured on a video surveillance camera recently set up in the park. And from information obtained during an interview with the youth, the two others were implicated.

Police offered no other details on the identities of the three, other than to say all three are juveniles.

"This is an ongoing investigation at this point, and we are not at liberty to release details yet," Noe said.

As of Thursday morning the DuPage County state's attorney's office and Woodridge police were working together to determine what, if any, charges would be levied against the three juveniles.

"How juveniles are handled is different than adults, so at this time we are waiting to see how the state's attorney will handle this case," Noe said.

The youths were arrested in connection with a fire at Windy Point Park that destroyed the modular play station used by tots, and is expected to cost between \$13,000 and \$20,000 to replace, said Mike Adams, director of the Woodridge Park District.

The park, officially dedicated June 10, has been vandalized over the past three months, but not to this extent, Adams said.

"We've had a few incidents since it was opened, people damaging shingles and wood pylons at the pavilion, but nothing of this nature," Adams said.

During the Sept. 12 Park Board meeting, Adams told trustees "the tot lot structure within the neighborhood park was destroyed in an arson event."

The park is in the Gallagher & Henry Farmingdale Village Unit 22 Subdivision, also known as Medema Subdivision.

Adams, who reviewed the video images recorded by a video surveillance camera, said three people who appeared to be teens could be seen going beneath the structure for a few moments and then exiting shortly before smoke appeared to come from the equipment.

A few moments later, suspects again were recorded going beneath the

structure and a short time later emerged before a greater volume of smoke, then flames, appeared.

A fire quickly engulfed the equipment, which was burned "to the ground," Adams said.

Within a few days the debris was removed, and the park remains open.

From the onset the fire was investigated as an arson, not an accidental fire, Noe said.

Adams said park officials are disappointed the park has been targeted by vandals since it opened three months ago.

"What's also disappointing is that it occurred in broad daylight on a Saturday when you would expect residents to be using the park. Had people been in the park using it, their presence probably would have acted as a deterrent," Adams said.

The fire occurred between 2 and 3 p.m. Sept. 9.

Park Board President Fred Hohnke said Park District officials have been disappointed "the park site has been a target of vandals from the get-go."

"Within a week of it opening we had vandalism there," Hohnke said.

The vandalism did not appear to be gang related, Adams said.

"We've had no graffiti there at all," Adams said.

During the board meeting, Adams told trustees the plan is to replace the structure by late fall, unless weather requires work to be delayed until spring.

"Even if we get a contractor within a week or two, it usually takes about six to eight weeks to deliver the equipment that needs to be replaced," Adams said.

Windy Point Park cost \$400,000 to construct, of which 75 percent of the cost was paid for through federal Community Development Block Grant funds, Adams said.

Insurance will cover the cost to replace the equipment, Adams said.

"What bothers me is that whoever did this did so in broad daylight, and more than likely lives in the neighborhood served by the park. No one really drives to this park; it is a neighborhood park," Adams said. "It's a shame a few individuals would go out of their way to destroy something that was meant to benefit the entire community. ... We will prosecute this to the fullest extent possible, absolutely."