

Young Salem cancer patient not dying, family says

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East comes back from 18-point deficit

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Cougars can't pull off win for ailing coach

— Page 1B

Skaters to have say in design of new Bristol park

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## Outside

Snow likely today. A break in the precipitation Sunday, but heavy snow expected Monday ..... Page 14A

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## Chuckle

You used to be able to bribe politicians. Now you have to submit sealed bids.

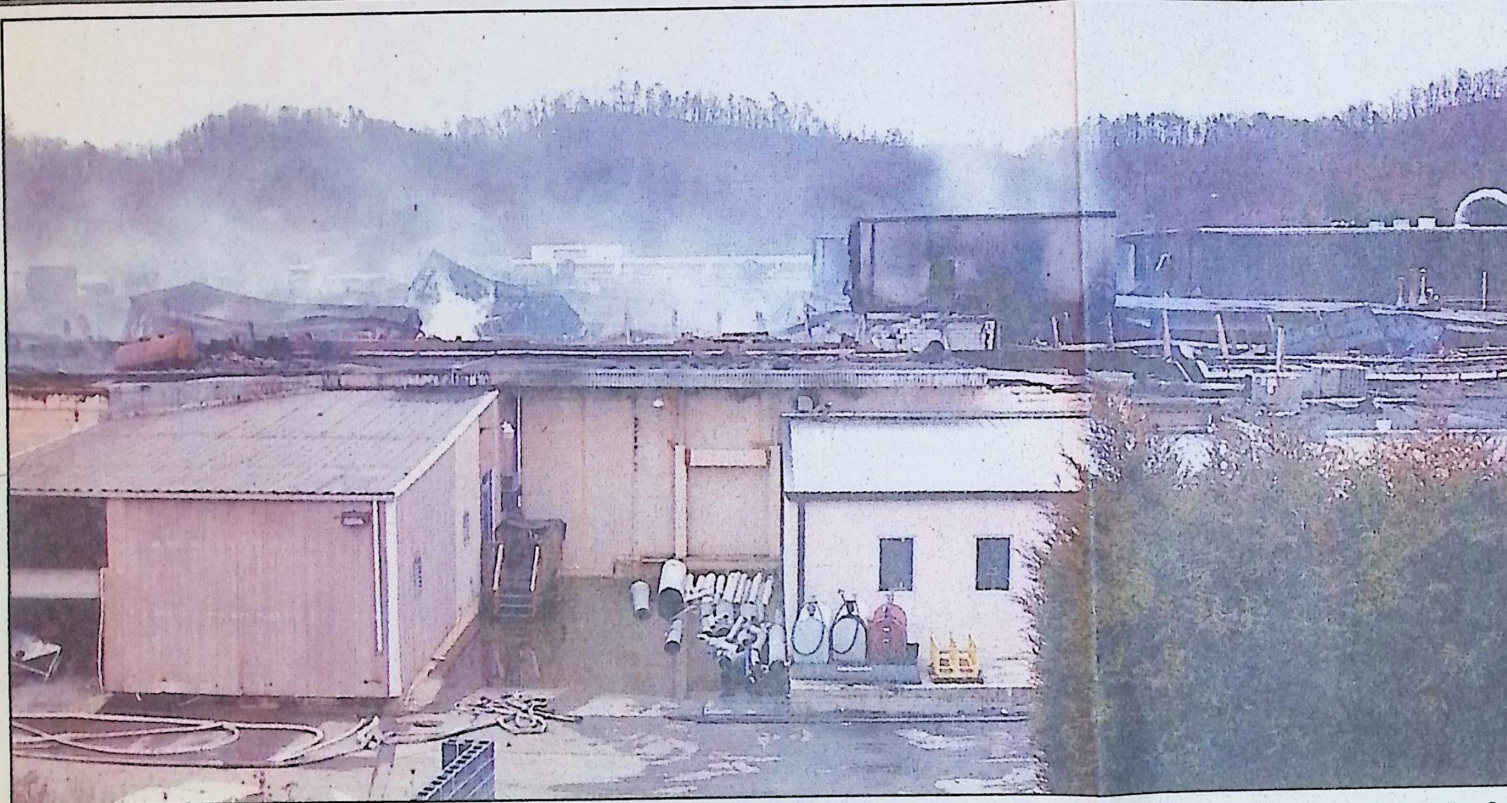
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# Bristol Herald Courier

126th Year No. 24563 Saturday, December 27, 1997

Bristol Virginia-Tennessean

28 Pages—Plus Supplements 50¢



Herald Courier/Jason Davis

## Exide surveys damage

### Fire's cause still unknown

By ANDREA HOPKINS

Bristol Herald Courier

A thick layer of black soot blanketed much of the Exide Super Battery Plant Friday as company officials arrived to survey the damage caused by a massive Christmas Day fire.

As the sun rose above the plant, the extent of the damage to Bristol's largest industrial employer became obvious. A large section of the plant's roof was in ruins, and what remained had been blackened by flames.

Plumes of gray smoke continued to drift skyward from the hull of the giant battery producer as firefighters continued to douse hot spots inside the structure Friday morning. Firefighters were expected to continue their vigil into the weekend as the cleanup began in earnest.

"There's a lot of damage. The entire facility has suffered damage to some extent from water and smoke," said factory manager Carl Howell, as he stood in Exide's darkened, soot-filled lobby Friday morning.

The bulk of the damage was confined to the "formation building" — a manufacturing area where up to 30,000 batteries are charged at one time. Although inspectors know where the fire began, they are not sure how it began. Company officials said the fire had caused no lasting environmental or health problems. After cleanup is completed, production is expected to resume in three to four weeks.

The plant's distribution center will resume normal operations today, but many workers will be temporarily laid off. The company lost only a small portion of its existing stock of batteries.

## What they said

Here is part of what company and fire officials had to say Friday:

■ The bulk of the damage was confined to the "formation building" — a manufacturing area where up to 30,000 batteries are charged at one time.

■ Although inspectors know where the fire began, they are not sure how it began.

■ Company officials said the fire had caused no lasting environmental or health problems.

■ After cleanup is completed, production is expected to resume in three to four weeks.

■ The plant's distribution center will resume normal operations today, but many workers will be temporarily laid off.

■ The company lost only a small portion of its existing stock of batteries.

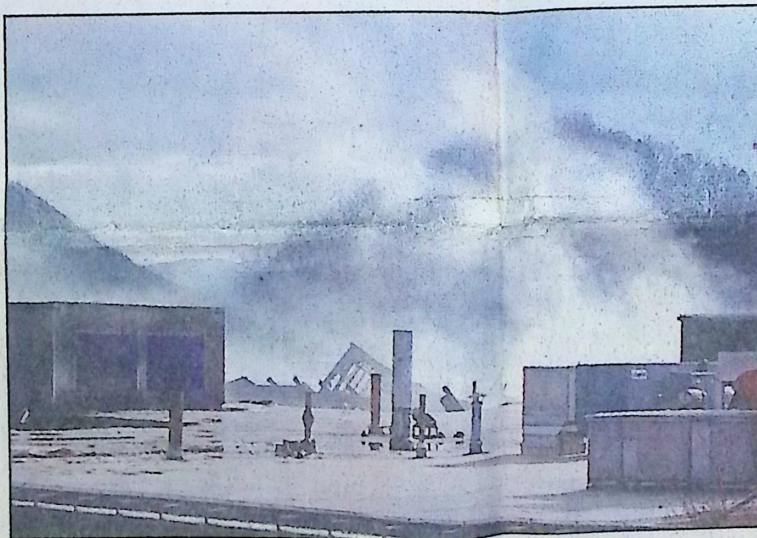


Jeff Carter, Exide plant human resources manager

'As far as the manufacturing equipment, everything is still intact. After we get the cleanup completed, we should be able to start back up within three to four weeks.'

## There's more

Malcolm Gavant's management skills will be put to the test in the wake of the Christmas Day fire. Gavant has been chosen to be Exide's new senior Southeast regional operations manager, and he will also be responsible for oversight operations of the Bristol Battery Super Plant. Details are on Page 4A.



Herald Courier/Jason Davis

(Above and left) Smoke continues to rise Friday from the Exide Super Battery Plant. A large section of the plant's roof was in ruins, and what remained had been blackened by flames in a Christmas Day blaze.

## Production downtime expected to last 3-4 weeks

By ANDREA HOPKINS

Bristol Herald Courier

Exide officials searching for a bright spot in their disastrous Christmas Day were hoping Friday that the plant would be back in business in less than a month.

"Production-wise, we don't expect to be down longer than three to four weeks," Human Resources Manager Jeff Carter told reporters Friday morning.

That may have seemed to be an optimistic prediction to those who saw the still-smoldering

plant Friday. But demolition crews were already moving in to tear down the damaged structure, making way for a new building.

"As far as the manufacturing equipment, everything is still intact," Carter said. "After we get the cleanup completed, we should be able to start back up within three to four weeks."

At the time of the fire, the plant employed about 800 people — making it Bristol's largest industrial employer. Carter said some of those employees will be back at work on Saturday, but many will be temporarily laid off.

The plant's distribution center will resume normal operations Saturday, Carter said. That operation involves slightly more than 200 of the plant's employees, Carter added.

"Cleanup operations will take an additional 150-200 employees. But, yes, some employees will be out of work for three to four weeks," Carter said.

Company officials were continuing to assess the damage to the plant Friday, and said they could not place a dollar value on the loss. Those figures might be available today, Carter said.

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Please see EXIDE, Page 14A



## EXIDE

From Page 1A

Two plant maintenance workers saw the fire as they checked the facility Thursday afternoon, Vinson said. The workers — who were the only ones at the plant when the fire began — called the fire department, but the blaze was burning through the roof by that time, Vinson added.

Burn patterns in the building's roof confirmed the workers' account of the fire's origin, Vinson said. But although inspectors know where the fire began, they are not sure how it began, the chief added.

"It was something to do with where they charge the batteries, but we don't know what caused (it)," Vinson told reporters at a press conference outside the city's No. 4 fire station, which faces the plant. "It could have been a malfunction (in the equipment) or a short in one of the batteries."

No matter what sparked the fire, it quickly became a roaring inferno that took firefighters more than five hours to bring under control. The conflagration prompted fears for emergency workers and area residents Thursday as potentially poisonous fumes formed a cloud over the area and a gas line threatened to blow at one point.

One nearby resident — who said she didn't want to give her name — said she was coming home from

a Christmas celebration when she saw the inferno raging just yards from her home. Surveying the damaged plant Friday morning, the elderly woman said living in the shadow of the burning facility brought fear into her life.

"It scared me so badly I couldn't sleep. I would look out every 30 to 40 minutes," the woman said. "I got up at 3 a.m. and the smoke was still coming out (of the plant). ... I'm scared to live up there where I do. I'm scared of what will happen."

Company officials worked to quell the community's fears Friday, saying the fire had caused no lasting environmental or health problems. Although the blaze released some sulfuric acid and lead, most of those materials remained inside the plant, Carter said.

"The smoke that was coming off the roof ... would be similar to a house burning down. It's mostly plastics," Carter told reporters. "As far as acid or lead, any water that was released during the fire, that's all contained in the plant."

Because of the potentially dangerous residue produced by the fire, all of the firefighters who battled the blaze went through a decontamination process Thursday. And some were taken to the hospital for precautionary blood tests to measure lead levels in their bodies.

Teams with the Environmental Protection Agency were at the

plant Thursday and Friday to test groundwater and make other environmental assessments, Carter said. It was not clear how long that process would take.

After fire officials gave the company the green light Friday, demolition work began on the heavily damaged building. Fortunately, the facility's new addition and battery storage area sustained little damage from the fire.

"They've got a crew ready to start demolition of the building right now, as we speak," Vinson said. "They're in the process of getting started as quick as they can replacing the building to get back in operation."

## PRODUCTION

From Page 1A

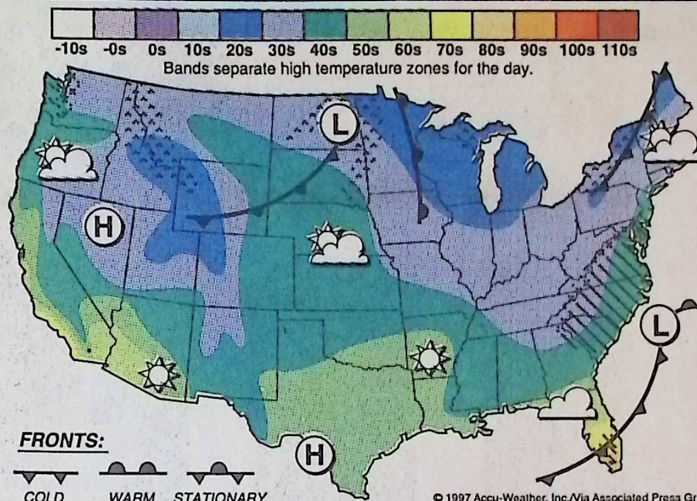
"We'll have a better idea of that tomorrow," Carter said. "We have our contractors on site looking to see what it's going to take to rebuild the roof and get the equipment in the charging area back in place."

The company lost only a small portion of its existing stock of batteries, many of which were in another storage building, Carter said. The manager called the stock losses minor.

"The only batteries that were lost were the ones in our charging area, and that was very limited," Carter said.

## Today's weather: Forecast for Saturday, Dec. 27, 1997

### The nation



### Forecasts

#### SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA

An 80% chance morning snow, 2-4 inches possible. High, mid-30s. North wind 10 to 15 mph. Partly cloudy tonight. Low, lower 20s. Mostly cloudy Sunday. High, upper 30s.

#### NORTHEAST TENNESSEE

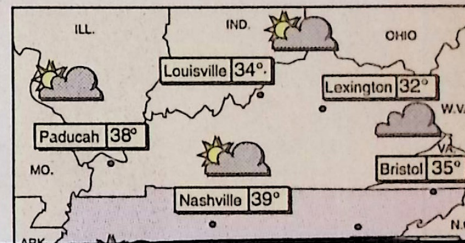
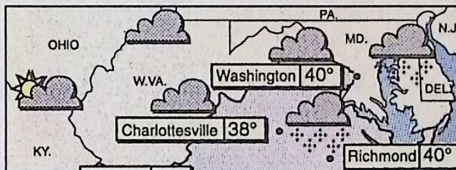
A 70% chance light morning snow, total 1-2 inches. Temperatures remaining between 30 and 35. Gusts. Mostly cloudy tonight and Sunday. Low, low 20s. High Sunday, mid-30s.

### Local stats

Friday's high was 49  
Friday's low was 37  
Sunset today will be at 5:21; sunrise Sunday will be at 7:40  
No rainfall through 8 p.m. Friday; monthly precipitation through midnight Thursday was 1.70"  
Record high for this date is 69, set in 1982  
Record low for this date is 8, set in 1948

### The states

Forecast for daytime conditions and highs





# Gavant takes reins at Exide

Bristol Herald Courier

## Staff Reports

Overshadowed by the massive Christmas Day fire that damaged much of the Bristol Battery Super Plant was the announcement this week that Exide Corp. had appointed Malcolm Gavant as the company's senior Southeast regional operations manager.



Gavant, who replaces Mike Roberts, becomes the fourth person to head the Bristol plant in 1997. Gavant was on vacation Friday and could not be reached for comment about the fire.

Roberts has accepted an offer to head Exide's Sure Start operations in Cooper, Texas. Roberts had been on the job since September, replacing Jim Toews, who was offered a job with the company's Tudor operations in India but declined. Toews, in turn, replaced Richard Randles, who retired from Exide in March for health reasons.

Gavant has spent the past 20 years with Douglas Battery in Winston-Salem, N.C. His last position was as vice president of technology and manufacturing. With Exide, Gavant is responsible for oversight operations of the Bristol plant, as well as Exide operations in Greer, S.C.

"With the tremendous growth of Exide over the past five years, Mike's expertise was needed in Texas, and we're proud of the impact he has made in the time he has been in Bristol," said Bill Barnes, senior vice president of Exide's North American operations. "Malcolm is a vital member of the Exide team, and we're confident we have management in place to take Bristol and our operations well into the next century."

A native of High Point, N.C., Gavant has been involved in the management and manufacturing of batteries for nearly 30 years. He received a degree in industrial management from Georgia Tech. He and his wife, Beverly, are in the process of moving to Bristol Tennessee.

Dec. 27, 1997





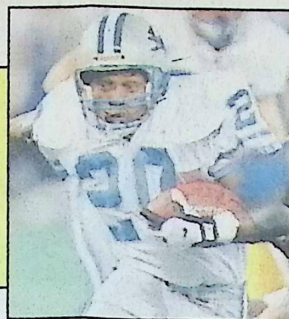
## Weather

Mostly cloudy, cold, with snow flurries; high 38.

## Massacre

Officials face cover-up charges.

— Page 4A



## He's No. 1

Detroit's Sanders chosen NFL Offensive Player of Year.

— Page 1B

## DUI

Driver leads high-speed chase.

— Page 3A

# Kingsport Times-News

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# Exide blaze guts portion of plant

By **TOM MCGHEE**  
Times-News Staff Writer

A Christmas blaze that gutted a portion of the Exide Super Battery Plant started in a room where batteries were charged, Bristol Fire Chief Paul Vinson said Friday.

"We know it started on a worktable that they use for charging. ... It could have been a malfunction. It could have been a short in one of the batteries," he said.

Around 35,000 batteries finished charging early on the morning the fire broke out, said Jon C. Lundburg, a spokesman for Exide. An attendant was on hand monitoring a computer that handles the charge while it was in progress, he said.

There are sprinklers scattered throughout the 700,000-square-foot plant but none in the area where the fire raged for five hours.

Sprinkler systems and voltage are a dangerous combination, said Jeff Carter, Exide human resources manager. Water can carry current and electrocute personnel or firefighters.

But there are systems that release dry chemicals to smother electrical fires, said Vinson.

Bristol long ago adopted the Southern Building Code, which requires such sprin-

klers. Sullivan County doesn't have a building code and has no similar requirements.

When Bristol annexed the plant several years ago, the city allowed the company to continue operation without upgrading its fire-protection system.

A sprinkler system might not have contained the blaze, said Vinson.

"I don't know if a dry system would have saved it. I don't know if anything would have saved it," he said.

The city did require the company to comply with the codes in any new construction. Structures built since the annexation include sprinklers, said Vinson.

Two maintenance workers and a security guard were the only personnel on duty when the fire broke out. The blaze burned through the roof before anyone knew it was under way.

Firefighters at a Bristol fire station across the street from the plant off Volunteer Parkway spotted a plume of smoke pouring from the roof about 3:30 p.m. When firefighters arrived, one of the plant employees told them the location of the fire. At about the same time, the security guard called 911.

Alarms on the premises are internal. There is no requirement for industries to



Smoke lingers Friday morning at the Exide plant in Bristol after a Christmas fire that started in the battery charging room.

Times-News photo — David Grace

maintain alarms that alert outside agencies. But many companies have systems that notify operators in emergency dispatch centers that a fire is in progress, said Vinson.

"It's just good business to

have notification alarms to where it notifies somebody on the outside," said Emergency Medical Service Director Mark Vance.

Christmas is the only day in the year that the plant

closes, said Carter. Since personnel normally work around the clock and there is a firehouse so near, he said, the company believes the internal alarm is all that is needed. He said he doesn't think an exter-

nal alarm would have resulted in a quicker response and less damage.

"Most likely after all this is over we'll sit back and take a

Please see EXIDE, page 2A



# Exide blaze destroyed \$1 million in batteries

**Continued from page 1A**  
look at this and see if things could have been done in different ways," said Lundberg.

The blaze devastated more than 10,000 square feet of space and destroyed \$1 million worth of batteries. But most of the plant and equipment outside the assembly area suffered little damage.

Melting lead and heated battery acid can release sulphur and other chemicals that are harmful if they are inhaled or make contact with skin. Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation employees responded to the emergency. They monitored smoke and checked to make sure water didn't flow into the sewer system, said Vance.

While the fire was burning, said Vance, there was little wind to carry the smoke from the site. Water was gathered by a company contain-

ment system. "We had a good day. We were lucky."

The company is still monitoring the area for environmental damages, and DEC personnel will report their findings to the department. The agency could require Exide to remedy any environmental damage.

The plant, which employs about 800 people, is expected to reopen in three to four weeks. Around 200 employees will work through that period at a distribution center on the site. Another 250 will be called in to help clean up the damage, said Carter.

A pair of workers who stopped by to view the smoldering ruins Friday said employees are concerned about their futures.

"Most of them have families," said one man, who asked that his name not be used.



# Exide fire ruled accident

## Deputy fire chief says electricity likely sparked blaze

By LEE DAVENPORT

Bristol Herald Courier

The Christmas Day inferno that gutted a large portion of Exide's battery assembly plant and filled the evening sky with a pillar of caustic smoke has been ruled an accident.

Meanwhile, a fire official said Monday that upgrades to the fac-

tory's fire-suppression system had been recommended months ago — after a similar but much less costly blaze in the same area of the plant — but that the improvements had not been carried out.

The Christmas fire erupted about 3:30 p.m. in the huge "formation" room where up to 30,000 automotive batteries may be charged at once. Bristol Tennessee

Deputy Fire Chief Gary Maiden spent much of Monday at the plant investigating the blaze and said he has ruled the fire was electrical.

"We're absolutely sure it started on the tables in the formation room, and the only heat source there was the (direct current) in those automobile batteries," he said.

But what actually was the mechanism for the blaze remained a mystery that may never be sorted out, Maiden said.

"Unless you were there at the very moment watching it, there's just no way to tell."

The plant was shut down for the Christmas holiday, and just two

Please see EXIDE, Page 12A

### EXIDE

From Page 1A

maintenance workers were there when the fire broke out, Exide officials said. Neither was hurt.

Maiden speculated that one of three things could have sparked the conflagration, which raged for more than five hours and still was smoldering the next morning.

"With a battery, something lying across the posts could cause a short," he said. "We don't know if it was that or if any of the wiring harnesses shorted or if something happened to a battery internally."

Maiden said the wiring harnesses are connected to the batteries to give them an initial charge before shipment. He said they hung from the ceiling "like a bunch of spider legs."

On Feb. 5, an electrical fire began in the same room while the plant was in operation. It was put out quickly and disrupted production only temporarily.

"We went down (after that blaze) and did an inspection, and we had a list of things," Maiden

said. "One of them did include updating the sprinkler system and the fire alarm system."

The deputy chief said that just a portion of the formation room was protected by a sprinkler system.

He defended the plant by saying the upgrades were "in the workings."

"All those wheels were in motion because of the fire there earlier this year," he said. "But the plant is so large that it's one of those things that doesn't happen overnight."

Maiden said he could place no dollar figure on the damage, but an Exide spokesman has said it would "handily" run into the millions of dollars.

Exide officials earlier had said that production at the assembly portion of the plant would be down for three to four weeks while the mess was cleaned up and the formation room rebuilt. That would have idled half the plant's workers — roughly 400 — while the remainder continued working in the factory's new distribution center or

helped with the cleanup.

But on Monday, Exide spokesman Jon Lundberg said a plan had been worked out wherein battery production could begin again on a smaller scale in just a week or so, though he said he could not estimate how many of the idled workers would be returning early.

He said assembly would be set up in other parts of the facility and that the batteries then would be shipped out to another Exide factory — possibly in Pennsylvania or Indiana — for charging.

"We're very excited about it," he said. "It took us a little while to survey the inside of the plant, and we realized fairly quickly that it wasn't as severe as we thought. Certainly, it did damage to our formation area, but the rest of the plant did not suffer greatly. ... The fire walls did exactly what they were supposed to do."

Lundberg also said that the laid-off workers would be eligible for unemployment and that the company would continue to provide the employees' health benefits through January.

BRISTOL HERALD COURIER  
FEB. 13, 1997



## Highway deaths

Virginia has highest total in seven years, but fatalities in Tennessee decrease

— Page 4A

## Investigation continues in S.C. sailing deaths

— Page 5A



## Big Orange gets crushed

— Page 1B

# Bristol Herald Courier

Published by Virginia Newspapers, Inc., a Media General company

126th Year No. 24574 Saturday, January 3, 1998

Bristol Virginia-Tennessean

## Exide targets May restart

Blue sky can easily be seen through what was once the ceiling of the formation room at the Exide Battery plant in Bristol Tennessee. The room was the origin point of a Christmas Day fire that heavily damaged the building and subsequently idled more than 400 employees. The damage was seen Friday during a press conference/tour, during which company officials outlined their immediate plans. Crews have already begun hauling away debris to begin the rebuilding process.



Herald Courier/Jason Davis

## New manager says more than 100,000 square feet damaged in holiday blaze

By LEE DAVENPORT  
Bristol Herald Courier

It could be early May before Bristol Tennessee's fire-ravaged Exide battery plant is again fully operational, the facility's new plant manager said Friday.

Malcolm Gavant invited reporters to the sprawling factory eight days after the Christmas Day inferno, showing them its gutted center — a charred chasm 10 times

larger than fire officials first had estimated.

Melted battery casings lay in piles alongside strips of insulation and pools of soot-stained water as cleanup crews worked to clear debris. Now roofless, sunlight streamed into the room. At its center was a pretzeled, dangling steel framing beam, and the smell of smoke still hung heavy in the air.

Gavant said that between 100,000 and 120,000 square feet "was totally demolished except for the concrete floor." Fire officials earlier had said the affected portion of the building was about 9,000 square feet.

Nearby, about 200 of the company's employees were back at work. The factory once had 12 assembly lines. After a week of cleaning and around-the-clock preparations, it now has four.

"Our plan is to start another assembly line every day until we get all 12 back," Gavant said. "We're pretty confident we can do a line a day."

For now, roughly half of the factory's 800 workers are laid off. Gavant said he hoped to have them back in "three or four weeks," even though it could be much longer before the reconstruction is completed.

"We had some temporary employees, and we will fill those jobs with our regular employees," he

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Herald Courier/Andre Teague

Dottie Webb, right, of the Tennessee Department of Employment Security, works with Exide employees Chris Russell, left, and Billy Ray Greear, background, as they fill out unemployment compensation paperwork Friday afternoon at the National Guard Armory.

## Idled workers file for benefits

By ANDREA HOPKINS  
Bristol Herald Courier

More than 450 Exide employees idled by the massive Christmas Day fire that roared through the plant filed for unemployment benefits Friday at the Bristol National Guard Armory.

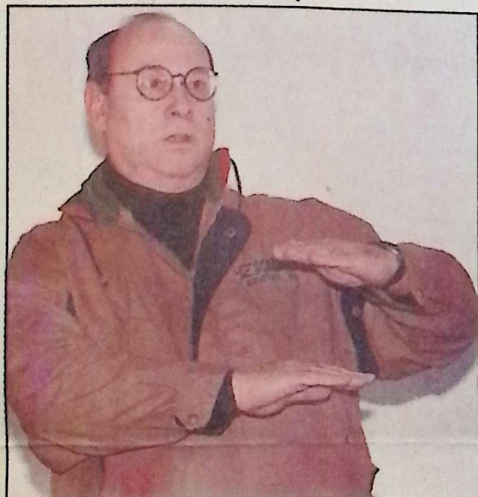
Many of the temporarily jobless workers were accompanied by their spouses and children as they filled out forms and stood in line waiting to get their benefits. The first benefit checks for the workers will begin roll-

ing in within the next two weeks, said Jean Young, district manager for the Tennessee Department of Employment Security.

The workers began arriving shortly after 8 a.m. Friday at the armory, even though the claims process was not set to begin for an hour. By 1:30 p.m., hundreds of applications had been processed.

"We've filed approximately 455 claims," Young said. "We moved very rapidly this time. ... We responded in

Please see WORKERS, Page 12A



Herald Courier/Jason Davis

Exide's new plant manager, Malcolm Gavant, talks with reporters about the extent of the damage suffered during the Christmas Day fire at the plant during a press conference Friday.



## EXIDE

From Page 1A

said. "Our goal is that every Exide worker who was working before Christmas even will be back at work within the next three to four weeks at the latest. That is our goal, if everything works the way I want."

But it could be that long before the laid-off workers see their first unemployment checks. More than 400 lined up at the National Guard Armory to fill out the necessary paperwork.

"When they start receiving their unemployment checks, that's between them and the unemployment commission," said Jeff Carter, head of human resources at Exide. "We will do everything possible on our side to get them their benefits."

The company has said it will continue to provide idled workers' health benefits through the end of

the month.

Gavant said the reconstruction of the formation room would be carried out incrementally.

"We're still rounding up supplies and materials," he said. "We expect the first section to be done around the middle of February. ... We expect to be totally complete and rebuilt ... by the first of May at the latest."

But before construction may begin, the plant must choose a fire-suppression system for the "formation" room, where thousands of automotive batteries may be charged at once. Fire officials said the fire likely began in or around a battery while the plant was closed for the holiday and that existing sprinkler- and fire-alarm systems had been inadequate.

Fire officials have said that a fire-suppression system was recommended months ago — after a much less costly fire in the same part of the plant. An upgrade was

planned but had not been carried out.

"We have sprinkler people in, and we have plans to make the room less fire-friendly," Gavant said. "We will sprinkle the room and will divide the room into sections with two-hour fire-rated walls, and it should contain or stop anything like this from happening again, especially something of this magnitude."

Gavant, who took over for former manager Jim Toews just before the fire, was meeting with reporters for the first time as chief of the Bristol Tennessee plant.

"These are kind of strange circumstances," he said. "I hate to meet you guys like this."

When asked how much damage the fire caused and how much it likely will cost to rebuild, Gavant said he could provide no figures. "Let's just say it's many millions," he said.

## WORKERS

From Page 1A

less than 10 days. It's been a very massive undertaking."

Young said her staff was working along with Exide to ensure that the process went smoothly for the laid-off workers. The procedure was similar to the one used by the Department of Employment Security in the past when local industries have shut their doors, Young added.

For their part, the idled workers appeared grateful for the help from the state unemployment workers and from Exide. Many

said that the situation was not as dire as it could have been and that they believed the company was doing everything it could to take care of its employees.

"It's pretty rough not having the money coming in," said William Riffey of Abingdon, who was in training at the time of the fire. "They're helping us out as much as they can."

Many of the workers learned about the catastrophic fire by watching television news broadcasts as they spent Christmas Day with their families. Riffey said the news was "devastating," but he

was looking forward to returning to work in the next four to six weeks.

Paul Campbell, of Blountville, also learned about the fire from news reports. Campbell — who supports a wife and two children — said the fire "could have hit us real bad."

But Campbell said he is one of the lucky ones: He will go back to work Monday.

"They're in the process of rebuilding, and they are going to call us all back," Campbell said. "We're pretty lucky. It could have destroyed the whole place."

Today

The



# Exide to rebuild — with sprinklers

By **TOM MCGHEE**  
Times-News Staff Writer

The building Exide Corp. erects on a portion of the company's plant demolished by fire will include something missing from the burned structure: a sprinkler system.

The Bristol, Tenn., Fire Department told the company to install safety devices in the burned area of the plant after an earlier fire last February, Deputy Chief Gary Maiden said Friday.

Managers at the plant off Volunteer Parkway had plans to comply with city fire codes before last week's blaze, said Malcom Gavant, manager for Exide's Southeastern region.

They were in the process of installing alarms before a 10,000-square-foot portion of the plant was razed by fire, he said.

The department set no time limit for compliance, said Maiden.

"Normally, if it's something small like a fire extinguisher replacement, we normally give people 30 days. But if it's a large situation like this where a sprinkler system is involved, we try to work with the people in order for them to retrofit these systems in with their reconstructions and their renovations," he said.

The Christmas Day fire broke out in a room where batteries were charged. Normal sprinkler systems that spray water are hazardous in high-voltage areas. Water conducts

electricity, and if a sprinkler head is accidentally knocked off, personnel working in the area can be electrocuted.

Some dry systems release chemicals that extinguish fire by removing oxygen from the air and are also dangerous.

The company will install a system that keeps the contents of pipes dry until sensors detect smoke. If a pipe accidentally ruptures, said Gavant, water won't pose a hazard. An alarm will signal employees to leave the area before sprinklers begin pumping water.

"We have plans to make the room less fire-friendly," said Gavant.

Most of the plant was built in rural Sullivan County before the city annexed the property. The county doesn't enforce building and fire codes similar to those followed by Bristol.

Once the city annexed, it required all new buildings at the site to comply with the National Fire Protection Association and Southern Building Codes. The codes are included in city regulations.

But the city didn't require compliance in facilities built before the annexation.

The state also includes the codes on its books.

"These are national codes that we adopted. There are state codes, but the county has no one to enforce them," said Maiden.

City Manager Tony Massey said Bristol may consider requiring industries to upgrade

existing buildings to comply with the fire codes when they are annexed. "It's something we'll take a look at," he said.

Sparks said it may be illegal to require compliance from companies coming into the city.

The fire in February was caused by faulty wiring that has been repaired. It occurred at a time when the plant was fully occupied, and damage was minimal. Last week's blaze broke out when only two maintenance workers and a security guard were on duty.

The blaze burned through the roof before anyone knew it was under way. Unlike alarms at some other industrial facilities that alert area emergency dispatchers, Exide's alarm signals are confined to the plant.

Replacement alarms will register with emergency services, said Gavant.

The company didn't release a precise damage estimate. Exide lost "many millions of dollars," in the fire, said Gavant.

There was little damage throughout most of the 700,000-square-foot plant. The company expects to have all 12 assembly lines fully operational within three weeks. Four lines are already running, and around 50 percent of the 800 employees are working.

Batteries will be charged at other company plants until the building that burned is back online. The facility is expected to be completely rebuilt by next May.



Times-News photo — David Grace

**A worker examines the area of Bristol's Exide plant that was destroyed in a Christmas Day fire.**

*Kingsport Times Jan. 3, 1998*





Herald Courier/Tan Van Le

Work continues Wednesday on Exide formation rooms (above and top right) that, when finished, will allow Exide employees to charge more batteries each day than were being formed before the Christmas Day fire.

## Exide's rebirth nearly finished

Bristol plant soon to begin charging batteries again as fire recovery work nears completion

By ANNE GRUNDON  
Bristol Herald Courier

Equipment will be delivered over the weekend that will allow employees at Bristol's Exide battery facility to begin charging batteries Monday for the first time since a Christmas Day fire destroyed the facility's formation center, plant manager Malcolm Gavant said Wednesday.

Contractors and employees who formerly worked in the formation room, the area where batteries receive their electric charge, are busy putting the finishing touches on the room where 7,000 batteries will be formed each day next week. Others already are working on three other formation rooms that, when finished, will allow Exide employees to charge more batteries each day than were being formed before the fire.

"This area has literally been under construction 24 hours a day, except for Sunday afternoons, since Dec. 26," Gavant said. "We had planned to expand the formation area before the fire, and we're doing that now. We've had excellent cooperation between dedicated employees, contractors and suppliers."

When completed in about four to six



Herald Courier/Tan Van Le

As part of the construction, 18 'scrubbers' that clean the air will be installed over the formation room.

Southern pine trees have been planted along Edison Circle, and insulation has been installed above the fan room to create buffers to the surrounding areas.

weeks, the formation area will be vastly different from before, said environmental health and safety manager Norm Enix. Thick walls separating the four areas and narrow doorways have been engineered to slow the spread of fire should one occur. A sprinkler system with an advanced alarm system also is being installed so that, in the event of fire, employees will receive an audible warning to drop their equipment and get out. That alarm will be followed in minutes by a spray of water, he said.

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Enix said the system is state of the art and designed so that those using electrical equipment will have time to leave before the water begins to spray. Otherwise, there is danger of electrocution, he said.

As part of the construction, 18 "scrubbers" that clean the air will be installed over the formation room, Enix said. The old facility had 12 scrubbers, he said, adding that the additional units will be part of the expanded facility. Plant officials also have planted Southern pine trees along Edison Circle and installed insulation above the fan room to create buffers to the surrounding areas.

"We want to be invisible and inaudible to our neighbors," Gavant

said.

The plant now employs about 750, said Human Resources Manager Jeff Carter. All those who worked in the formation room prior to the fire have been offered a job at the plant. Some are helping in other manufacturing areas, and some are helping with the construction. Only 12 opted to wait until their original job is available before returning to work, Carter said.

While all the changes are occurring, the actual assembly process continues to grow. Gavant said 30,000 batteries a day rolled off the assembly line last week for the first time since he came to Bristol late last year. A hiring spree continues, he added, to replace those who have left the plant and to fill newly created jobs.

Bristol Herald Courier

Feb 19, 1998



# Exide cites Bristol fire as factor in downturn

By ANNE GRUNDON

Bristol Herald Courier

The cost of rebuilding Bristol's Exide Battery Plant after a Christmas Day fire is partially responsible for the company's recent troubled financial condition, corporate officials said Thursday.

Stock prices have dropped dramatically in recent weeks and Standard & Poor's has placed the company on CreditWatch with negative implications, a signal to its creditors that the company may be unable to repay loans, according to Jeff Anderson, manager of Bristol's branch of J.C. Bradford. And earlier this month the company predicted that earnings for the quarter that ended Sept. 27 would be below those for the same period last year.

According to company spokesman Mark Semer, the costs associated with rebuilding the charging facility at the Bristol Tennessee plant, a \$2.8 million bad debt related to bankruptcy filings by three of the company's customers, and a decision to sell products that yield a lower profit margin are responsible for the decrease in earnings.

But, Semer said, the company now expects its per-share earnings to be better than the prediction made earlier this month, which ranged from a five-cent loss to a 10-cent gain. The earnings will be announced next week, he added.

The Christmas fire at the local plant destroyed the charging facility where assembled batteries are given their electrical charge. Malcolm Gavant — senior production, operations and distribution manager for Exide's southeast region — told reporters during a Wednesday tour of the rebuilt facility that the fire cost the company about \$15 million.

Semer would not comment on the cost, but said the number quoted by Gavant is "way off base."

The company's bad debt came from business dealings with Champion, APS, and R&S Strauss, Semer said. As for the Standard & Poor's corporate credit rating of BB- assigned to the company, Semer said Exide "plans to set up a meeting to discuss the situation." The range of S&P ratings, from high to low, is AAA, AA, A,

## EXIDE

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BBB, BB, B and D.

Anderson said he has received a lot of questions about Exide stock in recent weeks because of a drop in price to just over \$5 per share. He said the stock, which once sold for more than \$50 per share, is a good investment "if you're willing to be a longer term holder. I think Exide still has the potential to be the \$20 to \$30 stock they were a year or two ago."

Exide stock sold for \$7 per share when the market closed Thursday.

Anderson said the latest S&P rating came after the drop in stock prices. Now that the Bristol plant has made its final repairs and employment is at an all-time high, the stock value likely will increase again, he said.

"This hard time is going to make Exide work even harder," he said.

Gavant said he also remains optimistic.

"We know we're not doing as well as we should," he said. "This company is too big to fall down, so I'm not worried about it."

Oct. 23, 1998

Bristol Herald Courier



# Bristol Herald Courier

A Media General newspaper

Exide



## Market mover

Greenspan hints at rate cut; Wall Street reacts with rally

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## A penny more

Stamp price to go up Jan. 7

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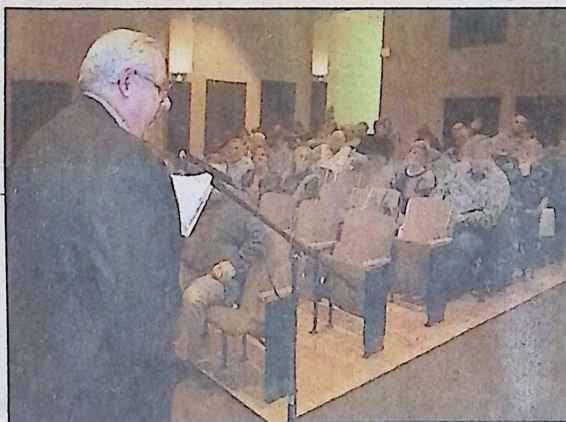
## Beamer not interested in Georgia job

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Jerry Wheeler, addressing the Exide gathering Tuesday, said, "We're talking about a company located in a residential neighborhood that boasts of building 7 million batteries per year. I would caution against economic growth at the expense of public health."



Andre Teague/Bristol Herald Courier

# Exide permit draws fire during forum

## Plant's neighbors ask state to halt expansion plans

By ANNE GRUNDON

Bristol Herald Courier

More than 50 neighbors of Exide's Bristol Tennessee battery plant complained of air and noise pollution Tuesday as they opposed a state permit that would allow the company to step up production by 25 percent.

Officials from the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation's Division of Air Pollution Control recorded the comments but admitted that a preliminary review indicated the company is eligible for the permit.

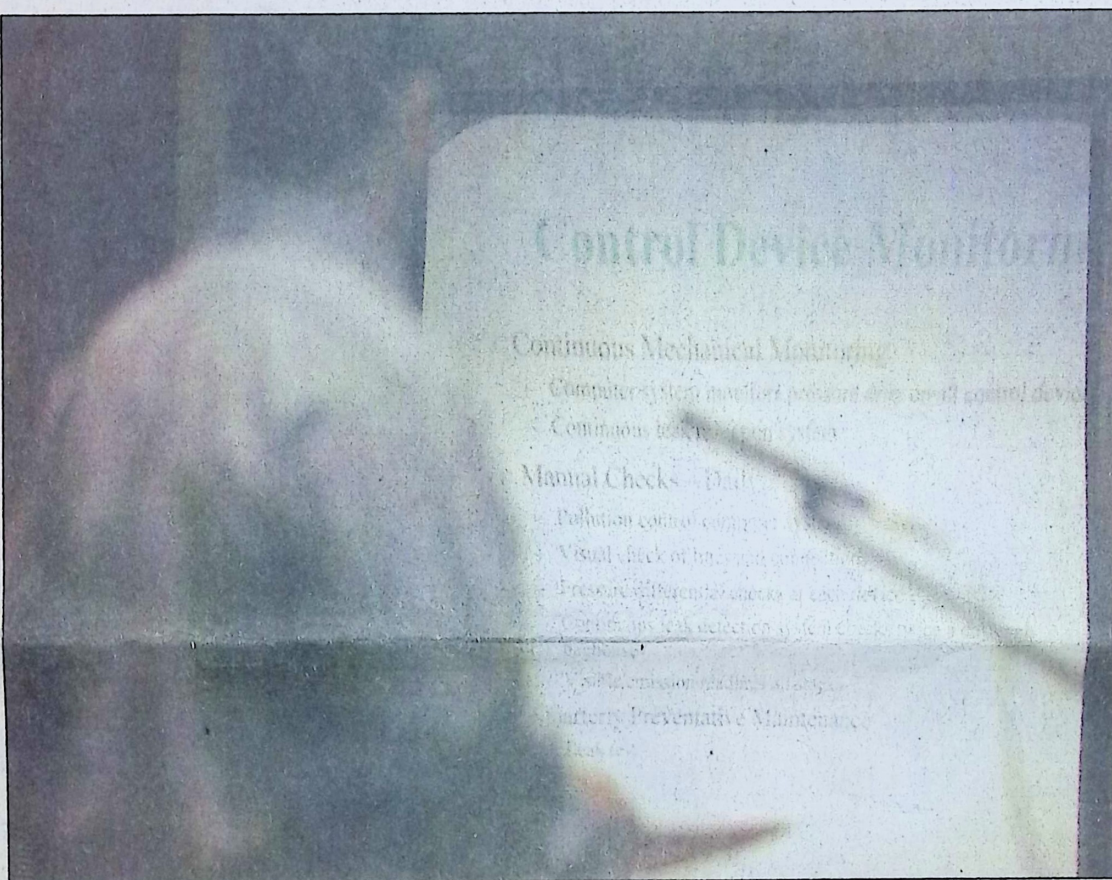
"We're talking about a company located in a residential neighborhood that boasts of building 7 million batteries per year," said Jerry Wheeler, president of the Exide Community Homeowners Association. "I would caution against economic growth at the expense of public health."

The meeting was part of a standard state process before issuing a requested air emissions permit, said Ron Culbertson, chief administrator of the Division of Air Pollution Control.

The comments will be used to determine whether a permit will be granted that would allow Exide to build another "baghouse" and add an assembly line to its operation.

Norman Enix, group environment, health and safety manager for Bristol's

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Andre Teague/Bristol Herald Courier

Norman Enix, group environment, health and safety manager at Exide, describes the pollution-control measures in effect at the Bristol plant.

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Bristol Herald Courier/Virginia

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Exide plant, said the baghouse is a filtering system that works much like a vacuum cleaner to dispose of waste. Three baghouses already exist on the property and are used to remove 99.9 percent of lead emissions from the air, he said.

The planned baghouse would be identical to the existing three, he said, noting that the company now has emissions well below permitted levels.

With the additional filtering system in place, Exide would be able to increase production from 7.5 million automotive batteries per year to about 10 million per year, said Rick Newberry, the plant's manager. Another 30 employees potentially could be hired as a result, he said.

But neighbors asked that the permit be denied. They complained of odors, excessive noise and continuous truck traffic near their homes. The problems will worsen if Exide is

allowed to increase production, they said.

"Lead can kill you," Wheeler said. "I get calls about pungent odors, discoloration on lawn furniture and windows. And all of us know about the noise."

Pamela Costagliola called it "abundantly ludicrous that this plant is allowed to operate less than one mile downwind of Avoca Elementary School."

She said residents need only look as far away as Saltville to see what environmental pollution can do to a community. In the 1970s, mercury contamination left by Olin Chemical Co. earned the Southwest Virginia town a place on the federal Superfund list.

"I'm here to tell you the city does put economic growth above us," Costagliola said.

Chris Houser said he and his wife have a clear view of the existing baghouses from their home and often have to turn up their televi-

sion to hear it above the noise of the plant.

"I wonder what a fourth baghouse will do to our quality of life," he said.

The comments will be considered as the state makes a final determination on whether the permit should be issued, said protection specialist Manir Ahmed. He said he expects to make a decision "within several weeks."

In the meantime, Neal Lebo, executive director of environment, health and safety at Exide's corporate office in Reading, Pa., said the concerns of residents will be taken seriously by the company.

Exide currently complies with all state and federal environmental regulations and plans to continue that if the permit is granted, he said.

"We plan to go back and take a look at all the concerns that have been raised here tonight," Lebo said.



# Bristol officials explain in-lieu-of-tax agreement between Exide and city

By MATTHEW LANE  
mlane@timesnews.net

BRISTOL, Tenn. — City and county officials last week explained the in-lieu-of-tax agreement Exide Corp. had with the city of Bristol.

The explanation comes a few days after a town hall meeting where about 50 Bristol residents voiced their concerns over a proposed project to install new equipment at the Exide plant.

Jerry Wheeler, president of the Exide Community Home Owners Association, opposes the expansion. In a 17-page statement, Wheeler expressed concerns ranging from possible contamination of the land, to noise pollution, to the standard used to gauge air quality at the plant.

Wheeler claims Exide leased the property and building previously belonging to the old Sperry Corp. for a period of five years, rent free and without paying property taxes.

Mike Geylin, director of corporate communications for Exide, said the company purchased the property — between 140 and 150 acres — for \$3.5 million in 1994.

Bristol's Deputy City Manager Mike Sparks said the property was then turned over to the city and owned by the city through the Bristol Industrial Development Board. When the property was sold to Exide in 1994, an in-lieu-of-tax agreement was established, Sparks said.

"Hypothetically, let's say a company buys property for X amount of dollars. Then it's deeded to the IDB with an agreement of paying in lieu of tax equal to the amount of taxes normally paid on the property as established by the county tax assessor," Sparks said. "During that five-year period the property is owned by the IDB, the company can make investments into the property without paying additional property taxes."

In March, the in-lieu-of-tax agreement ended and the IDB turned about 100 acres of the property back over to Exide for \$1, and according to Geylin, Exide let the city keep around 40 acres near the plant, which now houses Bristol Fire Station No. 4.

Sullivan County Tax Assessor Bobby Icenhour said during the five-year in-lieu-of-tax agreement, Exide paid nearly \$30,000 a year to both Sullivan County and Bristol.

"Exide paid \$29,111.23 each year to Sullivan County and around \$29,000 to Bristol," Icenhour said. "This year, Exide will pay \$257,520.93 in property taxes and a little less than that to Bristol."

Icenhour said the agreement is a "good deal" for the county and the city.

"We assessed the property at the asking price before Exide purchased it and that amount stayed constant for a five-year period which allowed Exide to make improvements to the property without being taxed," Icenhour said. "It's a good deal because we still get something for it."

In his statement, Wheeler also raised the issue that Exide is believed to be violating zoning laws by being zoned M-1 (light industrial) rather than M-2 (general industrial).

Sparks said the issue of a zoning change has never been raised by either side.

According to Bristol zoning laws, examples of M-1 zoning include animal clinics, auto parts manufacturing, carpenter shops, coal yards, enclosed facilities for manufacturing, ice plants, machine shops, pharmaceutical products manufacturing, stone cutting and warehouses.

Examples of M-2 zoning include bottling works, building materials yards, chemical manufacturing, dairy products, foundries, motor fuel stations, planing mills, stockyards, truck terminals and warehouses.

"Exide was never zoned M-2 because they never asked for it," Sparks said. "No one raised the question. They could operate under an M-1 or M-2, because both provide for manufacturing."

Because M-2 zoning allows for more heavy-impact uses, Sparks said it is more benefi-

cial for the neighbors of Exide to be zoned M-1.

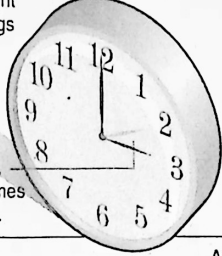
"M-2 is a more heavy-impact district, stockyards and

slaughterhouses. An M-1 would be less invasive to the neighborhood than an M-2 is," Sparks said.



Don't forget to set your clock one hour ahead tonight to observe Daylight Savings Time.

2 a.m.  
becomes  
3 a.m.



AP

# Exide plant in Bristol is spared

■ Iowa, Pennsylvania plants closing under latest series of cuts

By **ANNE GRUNDON**

Bristol Herald Courier

Exide's Bristol Tennessee battery plant has been spared the latest series of company cuts.

On Friday, Exide announced the closings of battery manufacturing facilities in Iowa and Pennsylvania.

An estimated 500 people will lose their jobs when those plants are closed, and another 450 Exide employees will be affected by work force reductions at the company's European facilities, said company spokesman Tim Yost.

The plants to be closed are in Burlington, Iowa, and Dunmore, Pa., Yost said.

The cuts are part of a corporate restructuring plan announced when Exide acquired GNB Technologies last year, Yost said.

He said the latest cuts should complete that restructuring plan and that no cuts are anticipated at Exide's Bristol facility or its other operations.

"You never know what the future holds, but we're hoping that the changes from the restructuring are behind us now," Yost said in a telephone interview Friday.

"The production from the two plants that will be closed will be spread around several of our other plants, but it's really too early to tell what impact it will have on Bristol or any other facility."

Exide acquired GNB last year when "both were limping along in many ways" due of an overcapacity of battery manufacturing, Yost said. The acquisition has helped Exide become a stronger company and to eliminate some of the unneeded capacity, he said.

Since acquiring GNB, Exide has closed or sold three distribution facilities, closed 60 North American branch offices, stopped production of automotive batteries at an Ontario facility so that production there could be transformed to industrial batteries, and closed an automotive battery manufacturing facility in Dallas.

Exide officials earlier said some of the production from the Dallas facility would be transferred to

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## EXIDE

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Bristol. Exide purchased Bristol's old Unisys plant in 1993 and has transformed it into the world's largest automotive lead-acid battery manufacturing facility. More than 25 million batteries have rolled off the assembly line in Bristol since the plant opened.