

DOUGLAS COUNTY – No need to worry about the smoke you may have seen coming from a corner of Sterling Ranch on Monday. Fifteen trained firefighters were on hand to ensure the “controlled” burn lived up to its name.

As part of a training exercise for Littleton Fire Rescue, Sterling Ranch donated two decaying old homes that were in “complete and utter disrepair,” said Littleton’s training officer, Captain Mike Balzer.

The buildings, slated for demolition, were instead put to good use as firefighters practiced new strategy and interior fire tactics, lighting small fires and putting them out several times before setting the buildings ablaze in a controlled environment. It’s rare that firefighters have a chance to practice new techniques on actual structures.

“We love when the opportunities come up, but they don’t come up very often,” Balzer said. “It’s some of the best training we can receive. We get to apply our knowledge, strategy, and tactics in a controlled environment and it affords us a better way to serve the community more efficiently in a real emergency.”

The burn involved long-vacant houses on the Sterling Ranch property, about one-half mile south of Titan and Roxborough roads. Several months ago, Sterling Ranch commissioned a full historical architectural survey of all structures on the 3,120-acre property. The survey, on file with Douglas County, determined that neither of the buildings had any historical or structural significance.

In compliance with State and Federal regulations, certified workers cleared asbestos from inside the buildings and cleaned up brush and other possible tinder outside in advance of the burn. The Sterling Ranch team also obtained the required permits from Douglas County before Monday’s exercise.

“We were worried that the buildings were becoming a hazard and that children might wander in to play in the old houses and get hurt,” said Sterling Ranch partner Jack Hoagland. “An additional bonus was the chance to help our community’s firefighters become better prepared for facing life and death situations.”

Fire departments must follow a set of strict national standards when doing a live burn on donated property, Balzer said. Standards include verifying that the people requesting the burn own the property and that all brush, trees, and other combustibles are cleared before the exercise begins. The experienced firefighters were on hand before the first fire was lit, and they remained on the property until the final blaze was safely extinguished.

Sterling Ranch also removed a few other dilapidated outbuildings that had become safety hazards. All salvageable materials from those buildings will be recycled, Hoagland said.