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The walls come tumbling down: Damaged public buildings are often the last to get much-needed repairs

By **Rick Holland / Daily News Staff**
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Every six weeks or so, Claire Lofgren has an odd ritual when she opens her desk drawer at the Department of Public Works office in Bellingham.

She replaces a box of mouse poison.

"The mice eat it and then they're supposed to go outside where they die," said Lofgren of the procedure she uses to keep the rodents from disrupting her work. Over the years, she has become accustomed to using such remedies to cope with conditions which would horrify most private-sector workers.

At the Memorial Building in Framingham, a torn-up section of floor in the Planning Department office means that employees see open ground where tile is supposed to be. The floor's condition has been caused by repairs on an underground pipe which feeds the heating system in the circa 1925 building.

"We're down to a dirt floor in part of our office," said Kathleen Bartolini, Framingham's director of Planning and Economic Development. "We have plastic hanging from ceiling to floor to prevent mold, dust and dirt from getting into the air."

The heating system is being fixed, which will also put an end to phenomena such as water coming from electrical outlets and steam filling the men's room. Bartolini is grateful for the work, which has also quelled the rancid smell of mildewed pipe insulation which she said at one time "was so strong, you could taste it."

But in MetroWest and Milford area towns with comparatively strong revenue streams, the question is how and why do communities allow their public buildings to reach such deplorable conditions?

"If something like a building already exists and it needs paint or TLC, it's so much easier to put that off because it's still functioning," said Ken O'Brien, chairman of Mendon's Board of Selectmen. "Water starts coming through the ceiling and people say, 'It's only a leak, put a bucket under it,' but they don't understand the ramifications of letting that continue: mold, rotten wood and much bigger problems."

Bartolini said morale can be affected from sub-standard conditions, but a long career in public service has made her philosophical about how and why certain public buildings generally get most of the municipal love, while others are relegated to status as perpetual bridesmaids.

"When (public building) decisions are made, you want kids to be safe first, so schools often get the first dollars towns have to invest," said Bartolini. "Then, you'll see a tendency to spend money on projects which can affect the entire town."

Investing in fire department equipment or facilities, for example, can reduce fire response times in a town. "When that happens, it helps keep everyone's fire insurance rates down," said Bartolini.

Yet even when public building needs are pressing, town officials and voters frequently elect to put off spending or use Band-Aid approaches.

At Wayland High School, elements of the aging facility caused concern among state officials who toured the building during last year's accreditation process. Principal Charles Ruopp said a plan to construct a new high school had to be scrapped after the state revamped its reimbursement procedure.

"There was no assurance we'd receive any reimbursement for a new building, and the town decided there would be no money for the building until 2007," said Ruopp. As a result, the school had two large modular science classrooms installed on the school grounds, each one about 40 years old.

"Some of the issues we're facing just can't be fixed without a major investment," said Ruopp.

The town of Ashland has a series of gleaming new public buildings, thanks to a veritable spending spree in recent years. But Town Manager John Petrin said it was because Ashland had "gone 20 to 30 years building nothing" in the way of public facilities. Ashland has a new Town Hall, high school, library addition and community center. Petrin acknowledged residents will be paying for years to come through a series of debt exclusions.

"Towns need to do a better job in regular planning for building and infrastructure, but when tough (financial) times hit, capital spending is usually the first thing to get cut," Petrin said.

It would be logical to think that buildings receiving lots of public use would receive the most attention and investment when it comes to maintenance dollars.



Julie Aresco teaches a Spanish class in a crowded modular classroom at Wayland High School. (Allan Jung photo)

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Not so at places such as the Millis Public Library, even though director Linda Stetson said the number of registered borrowers has nearly doubled since the building opened in 1967.

"In November, it was so hot in our back offices, we had to open the windows because we couldn't turn the temperature down," said Stetson. "At the same time, at the front circulation desk it was freezing."

Shortly after Stetson arrived on the job last September, an inch of water washed over the doorjamb in the library foyer.

"Kids in the community tell us they'd like a clean and safe place to do their work...but they just don't feel that this is that kind of place," Stetson said.

Sounding a common theme among town employees, Stetson stressed she is not complaining about current work conditions. She said Millis provides a better environment than the position she left with a state library for the blind in Atlanta.

"We had bullet holes in windows and rats in the stacks there," she said. "(But) there are plenty of people who I believe would simply (refuse) to work in conditions we see in many public buildings."

Clearly, part of the problem is the big-ticket nature of the expenses. With state help for buildings uncertain at best, towns and their taxpayers are increasingly left to pay for greater share of the bill.

"I pay taxes and I'd fight for a new police station," said Gerard Daigle, a Bellingham resident and chief of police in the town. "But if it means (a property tax) override, I'd be the last one to vote for it. Taxes are high enough as it is....People can't take it."

O'Brien said he believes towns that continue to put off maintenance do so at their peril.

"A building is no good if it leaks, that's not something that should be tolerated," he said. "We need to stop nickel-and-diming these things and do what needs to get done....The phrase that comes to mind is, 'Pay me now or pay me later.'"

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