

Town moves closer to consolidated maintenance

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The town took the first significant step toward consolidating its building custodial and maintenance services with the school department.

The town's major fiscal board — the Board of Selectmen, the School Committee and the Finance Committee — last week endorsed the concept of merging the building maintenance service under one roof, but left the mechanics of the process to the town manager and school superintendent.

"It is going to be less expensive to run a tight building maintenance program, than having two mirror operations," said Town Manager Peter Hechenbleikner.

Merging the town and school custodial and maintenance functions is not a new idea. Three years ago the town and schools began moving toward merging these maintenance functions. Last year, the school department agreed to provide custodial services for the town's seven buildings, but a full merger was postponed while a consultant reviewed the services.

Peat Marwick, a management

consulting firm, last spring reported what the town and schools already knew: the respective custodial and maintenance departments are under staffed.

The town officials estimate it will cost approximately \$277,000 to add the staff needed to properly maintain the 1 million square feet of space in the 14 buildings owned by the town and schools. Current planning calls for the school department to manage the combined service.

"This concept is not going to save us money, but for small money it is going to improve the quality of service to the people and children of the town of Reading," said School Superintendent Dr. Harry Harutunian.

At a School Committee meeting last week, Hechenbleikner suggested the town could phase in the increase for the needed staffing and fund it over a three-year period. Although both sides agreed merging the maintenance service is a priority, it disagreed on the level of funding for the first year. The town recommended \$70,000, while the schools only advocated for \$48,000.

It is now up to Harutunian and

Hechenbleikner to devise a long-term plan for merging the staffs of the two sides and how to implement it over the next three years. One of the toughest hurdles they will have to overcome is how to maintain the integrity of the maintenance budget.

Unlike the town, the school department can transfer money around different parts of its budget and spend it in anyway it sees fit. The town can only spend money on items and services for which Town Meeting approved.

School Committee members expressed reservations over maintenance funding, stating they did not know what they would do if faced with the choice over cleaning or textbooks. Several selectmen expressed similar concerns that they want to turn over the maintenance program if there is the possibility of losing custodian services to educational programs.

"We've seen what has happened in the past, every time we get in trouble we steal from maintenance," said Finance Committee chairman James Keigley.

"We've got to say we're going to maintain a level of funding to maintenance," said Selectmen

Camille Anthony.

Suggestions made for ensuring a consistent and dedicated budget include creating a jointly administered department, creating a line item in the school department that can only be adjusted with the consent of the town manager, or having the town manage the maintenance program.

"There needs to be some mechanism to ensure there is a dedicated funding stream," said School Committee chairman Robin D'Antona.

Unless Hechenbleikner and Harutunian can devise a funding system that the school department cannot withdraw funds from at will, the merger may not happen.

"If it's in the budget without any of these protections, then it really isn't a deal," said Selectmen Chairman Bruce MacDonald.