

Chronicle

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School budget juggling blamed FinCom Chair says RMHS is in poor shape

By BOB HILLIARD

READING - Carol Grimm, the chairwoman of the Capital Improvements Sub Committee of the Finance Committee, reported to the Finance Committee on Wednesday night that she had just completed a tour of Reading Memorial High School and expressed her feelings that the building was in such poor condition; that the Coolidge Middle School was a "palace" in comparison. She noted this statement was not to minimize the significant work that has to be done to Coolidge Middle School to make it fully functional. She indicated that several of the corridors at the high school, as many as four in total, had buckets to catch rain water from a recent rainy spell. Other committee members were quite surprised and noted that the town had only recently done major roof repairs on the facility.

what she called almost complete absence of routine maintenance. She indicated that corridors were extremely dirty and unkept. That major areas of the building were in terrible condition and noted that lockers are extremely disreputable. In fact, she noted, the only part of the building that was in decent condition and clean was the cafeteria kitchen, which another Finance Committee member observed is probably because the Board of Health inspects the facility for cleanliness periodically.

Most of the conditions mentioned in Grimm's oral report have been outlined in two recent reports on the building, one prepared by the Architectural firm of Drummy, Roseanne and Anderson. They recommended an overhaul of the building for \$30 million, which would be 64 percent state reimbursed. The School Building Advisory

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\$30 mill

Ms. Grimm went on to detail

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Committee did not recommend this project, but Dr. Harry Harutunian is looking into cheaper alternatives. Grimm noted that it has taken the town 10 years to achieve this level of school disrepair, and it may take 10 more years to correct the problem.

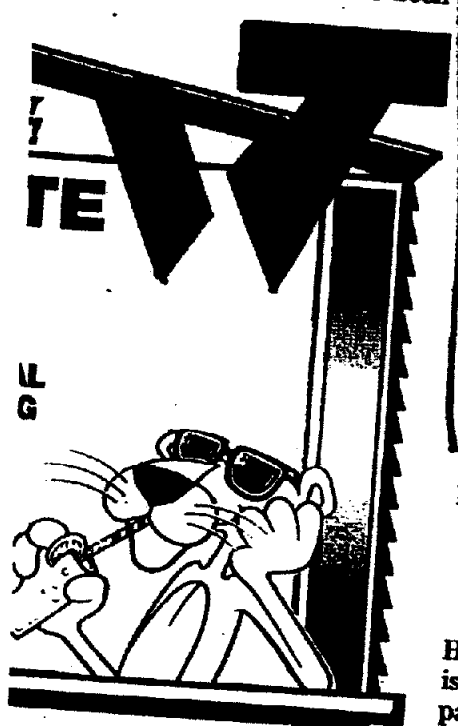
What made this report a little different is that Grimm challenged the quality and quantity of everyday maintenance that occurs in the building, over and above the basic decline that has occurred because of the building's advanced age. She indicated that the areas behind the building, where day care kids are housed, was filthy, with birds nesting in light fixtures and little effort to keep that area of the facility clean was evident.

Several Finance Committee members jumped in and blamed much of the schools current state of disrepair on budget juggling in the past by the school department. They charged that the school department has been

using funds allocated for building repairs, for other uses. Nathan White complained that state law allows the school committee to move funds around and as a result school maintenance has suffered. He noted that he was surprised that after spending over \$6 million on the Birch Meadow and Eaton schools, these projects are still incomplete. Grimm noted that one problem with the town is that it always chooses the cheapest way to repair things and that kind of false economy frequently comes back to hurt the town.

Ms. Grimm reported that she had been asked by Dr. Harutunian to serve on an ad hoc committee to help him develop his overall plan to rehabilitate schools. This committee would also include Russ Graham, Tom Stohlman, Richard Radville and Town Treasurer Beth Klepeis, along with Harutunian. There was some discussion as to whether this would be a committee covered by the open meeting statute and thus open to public scrutiny and press coverage. That issue was not resolved and there was some indication from Town Manager Peter Hechenbleikner on Thursday that Town Counsel Ted Cohen might have to be consulted on this issue. It is standard practice in municipalities for such boards that deal with public issues to be open to the public. In fact, there are very few exceptions in state law allowed for towns to do the public's business in private.

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The clinic will be run at the Hawkes Field House, and the fee is \$50. Checks should be made payable to co-director Carl McFadden.