

Chief: alarm failure tied to lack of maintenance

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The Fire Department has been trying since last spring to resolve "numerous problems" with the high school fire alarm system that Fire Chief Greg Burns Tuesday characterized as "basically, maintenance items."

"At no point was the school unsafe," Burns said.

The Fire Department, through Fire Prevention Officer Lt. Paul Jackson, set a deadline of this past Friday to have all the deficiencies corrected. Most of the work has been done, Burns said. Some parts had to be ordered to complete the rest of the work, he added.

After last summer the department became aware of problems at the high school, "Every time we went up there we found items that should have been addressed by routine maintenance," Burns said.

Furthermore, the company that tests the school's fire detection and alarm system four times a year found problems as far back as May 2002, according to Burns.

Firefighters returned to the high school in the fall for an annual drill, according to Jackson. Members of the responding unit reported finding things that needed to be addressed, he said.

Jackson compiled a 44-item alarm system repair list detailing the condition of smoke and heat detectors and audio visu-

al devices, horns and flashing lights, the chief explained, and door holders in different parts of the high school complex including, he said, the Hawkes field house. The items "either do not work or have not been documented as repaired," according to the list.

In November, Jackson said he was informed that the Facilities Department, which operates under the jurisdiction of the School Department, "was not aware of the discrepancies as presented by Simplex."

Six days later, on Nov. 12, "Documentation was requested from either Simplex Grinnell or the School Department indicating all the items were corrected," Jackson

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wrote in his Jan. 2 letter to Cacciapuoti.

In late November and late December, Jackson "again inquired on the status of the repairs to the alarm system and sprinkler testing," according to his letter to Cacciapuoti. "At that time I believed we had an understanding that the repairs to the alarm system were underway and a date of Dec. 27, 2002, was chosen for an inspection."

At that inspection, Jackson reportedly observed as Simplex tested one-third of the school fire protection devices. "I was able to observe many items listed as requiring repair on the Nov. 4, 2002, fax were not functioning," he wrote.

Jackson attributed the problems to "a breakdown of communication" between Simplex and the Facilities Department.

Parts not available

Facilities Director Domenic Cacciapuoti attributed the delay in making repairs to the equipment itself. Because of the age of the system, some parts had to be manufactured,

he said Tuesday. The company that holds the contract to test the system, Simplex Grinnell, didn't have the parts, but it got them, he said.

Cacciapuoti praised the communication between the Fire Department, Simplex and his department.

As of early January, the condition of the alarm system violated the Massachusetts Fire Prevention Regulations, Jackson wrote to Cacciapuoti in a letter dated Jan. 2. He cited four sections of the regulations. One pertains to dangerous conditions; another, to conditions that interfere with efficiency and use of any fire protection equipment.

The other two regulations concern emergency and standby power for exit signs and lighting. The emergency generator for Building A "does not automatically power emergency lighting and exit signs. "Until emergency power is properly repaired in 'A' building, no activities and/or functions shall be allowed after sunset," Jackson wrote to Cacciapuoti. The School

Department has paid for two firefighters to staff the administrative area of the high school "a couple of times," during night meetings, Burns said.

Jackson's letter to Cacciapuoti and the 44-item repair list were included in the selectmen's packet of materials for their meeting last Tuesday.

No sprinklers required

The condition of the high school fire safety system is particularly timely now, as residents consider a request to spend \$54 million to renovate the high school.

One reason to support the high school work, according to a flyer sent out to residents by Building Pride, is because the building violates building code because it has no sprinkler system.

That's wrong, said Burns. Sprinklers were not required when the building was built, Burns said — the building is grandfathered. Other buildings, including the Killam Elementary School, have no sprinkler system for the same reason, he said.