

# Maintenance plan support slow in coming

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Before taking their plan for consolidating the school's and town's building maintenance programs before the Budget Council for approval, Town Manager Peter Hechenbleikner and School Superintendent Dr. Harry Harutunian had hoped to enlist the support of the School Committee.

In a classic example of "Catch 22," the School Committee said it would support the proposal, but only if the Budget Council committed to funding the needed resources to make consolidation work.

For more than three years, the town and schools have moved toward a unified management of the town's physical plant. Last year, the school department agreed to provide the custodial and maintenance service to the town's seven buildings. But, a study conducted last year by Peat Marwick Associates confirmed what the town already knew: The custodial and maintenance departments are understaffed.

"At the present time, the school department does not have enough people to clean all our buildings," Harutunian said. "We have added staff, but we are nowhere near the level of the late '80s when we had severe budget cut backs."

The schools currently spend \$3.5 million and employ 28 people for cleaning and maintaining its seven buildings. The town spends approximately \$600,000 and employs three people to care for its seven buildings.

The Peat Marwick report agrees that consolidating these services will create more efficiencies, but it will take upwards of \$277,000 to hire the staff needed for the job. The consultants recommend hiring new

custodians at a cost of \$91,000, an additional supervisor for \$7,000, more professional maintenance staff for \$121,000, and a clerk for \$22,000.

"It comes down to whether the Budget Council and the town of Reading will make a long-term commitment and add custodial personnel," Harutunian said.

Hechenbleikner envisions a 2 1/2-year phased process of increasing custodial and maintenance funding, gradually elevating the staffing to the needed level.

"Progress can be made given some time and given some commitment," Hechenbleikner said.

Hechenbleikner and Harutunian hoped the School Committee would endorse the shell of the proposal, enabling them to develop a plan for making the consolidation work. But, given additional personnel needed and the increase funding required, the School Committee opted to let the Budget Council make the first move on this plan.

"I'm committed to making the plan work if the town and the Budget Council are committed to providing the money needed," said School Committee member Mary Williams.

"If we had a concrete plan, it would be a lot easier to present this consolidation," said School Committee chairperson Robin D'Antonia.

While the School Committee embraced the concept of consolidation, the mechanics of the proposal bothered members. Because the accounting regulations the school department operates under are different from the town's in that it can move funds from various accounts at will, the potential for having a conflict between education spending verse maintenance does exist.

This concern was amplified by

Hechenbleikner's admission that he would prefer the town managing the custodial operations and that other area towns with similar arrangements do not have the service administered by the schools.

Harutunian tried to allay those concerns by stating the school department's policy of not jeopardizing the physical plant by siphoning off the maintenance budget.

"We don't move any money out of the maintenance budget because we've budgeted that money and we've made a commitment to use it for maintenance," he said.

To further minimize the risk of a conflict between maintenance and education spending, Hechenbleikner said he would like to see a jointly-administered custodial account that cannot have funds removed without mutual agreement.

Regardless of whether the town consolidates custodial and maintenance services, both Hechenbleikner and Harutunian said the need for increase staffing will still exist. They added the need will only get worse when the new police station opens and the Coolidge Middle School expansion is completed.

"In the next year, we're going to have more space than we can handle when we're already saturated," Harutunian said. "We're going to be adding windows, teachers, aides and with that we need to add custodians."

"It really isn't working now, but I really don't think we can expect it to work given the current resources," Hechenbleikner said.

The Budget Council will take up the proposal at its meeting tonight. If it supports the consolidation and expansion plan, Hechenbleikner said funding could be added beginning this year.