

## Editorial and Opinion

### Building Maintenance Issues Overlooked in State's Capital Planning

As Gov. Deval Patrick puts forth \$14.5 billion in capital projects, there are two major questions that should be kept at the forefront of any discussions. First, have funding sources been earmarked for the annual maintenance of all of the new proposed projects? And second, have sufficient funds been set aside for the hundreds of existing infrastructure that have been neglected for decades or, in some cases, generations?

Without these assurances, Massachusetts has found only a temporary solution to a costly price tag that continues to expand with each passing year. The commonwealth has fallen woefully behind in funding routine construction maintenance – a critical piece in protecting so many of our real estate and infrastructure assets.

One particularly glaring example is the status of the state college system's capital assets. A lack of annual care has created devastating consequences for many buildings on the 24 campuses.

Salem State closed its library in October when structural issues threatened safety. College officials say that the commonwealth has made no repairs or general maintenance on the building since it was erected in 1969. Fitchburg State has had to post signs above all of its water fountains warning students and faculty not to drink the water because the pipes do not meet current building codes. And at Framingham State, the red bricks covering the facade of one of its buildings began falling away and buckling.

The main problem is that the state's construction has never been based on a solid investment model. No one in the private or public sector should construct a building without the assurance that funds earmarked for the project include an endowed fund that will provide for at least 2 percent of its replacement value on an annual basis. The 2 percent minimum investment in routine maintenance is based on a 50-year depreciation schedule. At 30-year depreciation, the percentage should rise to 3.33. At the end of that time frame, the state will either have a solid building or, if not, will have invested enough funds to build a new one.

#### No Easy Fix

The costs of deferring maintenance are enormous. Inflation, particularly in steel and concrete, continues to dictate higher prices each year. Analysts predict that these major factors will push the cost of construction up 30 percent over the next few years alone.

A tally of deferred maintenance projects listed in a 2003 state study, titled "Matching Facilities to Mission: Strategic Capital Program," showed a total price tag of \$1.2 billion. By 2010, the cost will have more than doubled to \$2.9 billion. The longer we defer maintenance the more it will cost the state in the end. Maintaining buildings and infrastructure must be something that is carefully planned. We cannot afford to ignore these projects and sit idle as they crumble.

Building repairs and maintenance are not glamorous and often are minimized. However, deferring maintenance can inhibit a school's ability to attract students and highly regarded faculty. It also can translate into tuition hikes and eat into operating budgets.

The state's colleges already have created an assessment of all of the projects that need to be done to bring campuses up to par. This will not be an easy fix – particularly since a majority of the current funds are earmarked for new buildings. Restoring and maintaining the state's existing assets should not be forgotten. The state would be well served to earmark annual emergency funds to immediately begin attacking the list of priority projects.

