



Maintenance is More Than “Maintenance”

By Matt Adams, P.E.

Now that budgets will be scrutinized with an ever sharper pencil due to current economic conditions, the maintenance budget will get its usual “second look” from administration. Capital budgets, operation budgets, training budgets, and every other budget will get a haircut this time. We have been through this before and will make do and continue to serve the mission of our institutions. However, it’s been a few

years since we had a major downturn in the economy, and this time there is some new thinking about the services we provide.

DEFERRED MAINTENANCE VS. DEFERRED RENOVATIONS

We have learned during recent years that there is a distinct difference between deferred maintenance and deferred renovations. New industry best practices have also taught us that planned maintenance includes many sub tasks and that even preventive maintenance can be further broken down into more definitive levels. Even with the increased rationalization of maintenance services there is still the overriding desire to convert what is commonly referred to as UPM (or unplanned maintenance) into planned maintenance.

This has always been the “holy grail” of maintenance planning and budgeting efforts. Prevailing wisdom suggests that there are a number of strategies that will help transition a plant maintenance department from reactive to planned mode. Most if not all of these strategies rely on the ideal that there are two primary services that the maintenance department provides: planned maintenance and unplanned maintenance. In fact, we now know that these services are only two slices of a total budget resource pie that includes as many as seven other pieces, all relevant.


In New York City, Bob Gavlik, director of operations, City Zoos and New York Aquarium, is keenly aware of the other non-maintenance, maintenance

services. At any one of the parks operated by the Wildlife Conservations Society (The Bronx Zoo, Prospect Park Zoo, Central Park Zoo, Queens Zoo, and the New York Aquarium), there is an overriding priority to keep the animals safe and healthy and the guests happy. Does this sound familiar to what some of the auxiliary enterprises operating within our educational institutions have proclaimed for years? Resident Life departments have always focused on students and customer satisfaction as priorities.

For Gavlik, unplanned maintenance is a reality, and while it can be managed, it will never go away. Furthermore, based on the mission of the parks, he is most often judged by the effectiveness of the staff to unplanned failures and emergencies and other non-planned maintenance services. “Given this defined service priority and limited staff, putting out fires becomes the specialty.” First of all, the budget is affected by the priority of keeping the parks going. Given budget shortfalls, the other items of planned maintenance will by default take a second seat at the table. Furthermore, it’s hard to mix a quick reaction team mentality with a long-term planned maintenance mentality. We have all seen this in the trades.

There will never be enough money to provide all of the services that our stakeholders desire. As budgets shrink, we will be able to provide less and less. Given this, managers can either spread limited (staff) resources thinner and thinner, or prioritize services. Unfortunately, for many cultural and political reasons, many of our peers continue to spread their departments thinner and thinner. Stepping back, it’s easy to see that over time, this is a losing plan. It’s like the saying goes, “One size fits none.”

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DEFINING OUR SERVICES

New self-analysis has taught us to further delineate and define the distinct services we provide. For example, the cost in terms of trade staff hours required for the following activities are rarely tracked or budgeted, but they should be:

- Moves and set-ups
- Special events like fund drives
- Meetings or graduation
- Support for sporting events
- Escort of contractors
- Summer camps
- Daily goodwill services to customers
- Off-hours coverage by staff
- Required annual testing
- Clean-up of contractor work

It is revealing to create a list of all “non-maintenance” maintenance services and estimate the workload associated with each. At some places, like the Zoos in New York, substantial

time is spent on a number of activities associated with external contractors. In fact, the converted labor cost is always substantial enough that it must also be included in any make vs. buy analysis of outsourced trade activities.

Given that that there will be a need to reduce cost in the next year or two, it must be made clear what services are “must-haves” and what are “nice-to-haves.” In other words, based on the mission of your institution, what are the priorities assigned to the maintenance and non-maintenance activities newly delineated? It might be that given a transparent breakdown of staff hour requirements for each current service, the budget office or senior administration might have to make the choice of reducing the department’s workload by service type, or at least reduce service levels in lower-priority functions. As Bob Gavlik interprets this reality, “It

might not be in the best interest of the maintenance staff to take on the responsibility of planned maintenance if they are charged to prioritize emergency response. Perhaps contractors or another unit should be created to serve this need with a different budget.”

Clearly in the absence of clearly defined current service types, institutional priorities, and reduced budgets, no one will be happy with services during the coming years of budget downturns. However, those proactive managers that recognize the need to ungroup and rationalize the difference between maintenance and non-maintenance services will succeed. ☛

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Matt Adams is president of FM², Atlanta, GA. He can be reached at matt@adamsfm2.com.

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