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COMMENTARY

Shortcuts Could Leave Municipal Infrastructure Shortchanged

By D. Michael Hicks

AMERICA'S INFRASTRUCTURE HAS reached a dangerous level of disrepair. Many of our bridges, roadways, utilities and public buildings are in horrible condition and we are on the cusp of what the Urban Land Institute described in its recent "Infrastructure 2007" report as an "approaching train wreck."

In fact, the train wreck may already have arrived. Last year's deadly collapse of a major highway bridge in Minnesota is just the most dramatic evidence of our crumbling infrastructure. Local landmarks like Boston's Longfellow Bridge are in desperate need of repair, and many state and municipal buildings across the state are in such poor shape that they pose constant health and safety hazards to the people who work in and around them. Unfortunately, because of poor planning and misguided attempts to cut costs, many of Massachusetts' cities and towns are guaranteeing that the infrastructure crisis will not only remain with us for generations to come, but will increase at an even greater rate.

Since the implementation of Proposition 2½, municipalities have had to aggressively seek ways to cut the costs of all types of public projects. This has been exacerbated by dramatic increases in construction costs – construction and repair expenses have increased by 50 percent since just 1999. At times, the need for frugality has resulted in the development of public structures with substandard materials and designs.

One manifestation of this trend can be found in the recent development of some town public works buildings, or other "back of house" operational facilities. These buildings are often viewed as good places to cut costs since the majority of the public doesn't utilize them directly. As a result, an increasing number of these structures are being pro-



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cured utilizing loose, generic specifications written to encourage "creative," lowest-budget solutions under the theory that towns can cut costs by a substantial amount.

Tragically, while this approach may provide short-term financial relief, it more often as not results in higher annual upkeep and maintenance costs, a much shorter life expectancy for the building and significantly greater life-cycle costs. Substandard or inappropriate materials often generate structures that rapidly degrade and quickly require costly repairs that wouldn't be necessary with properly constructed facilities. Buildings with insufficient thermal insulation or inadequate construction details only assure significantly higher heating and cooling costs. And in the worst case, structures that are constructed cheaply will need to be replaced in a matter of years when, ideally, a public building should be expected to last

for generations. Clearly, this short-sighted approach doesn't represent a wise investment from any perspective.

The implications of such extreme cost-cutting extend beyond the costs of poor long-term planning. Scrimping on the development of public buildings also can have potentially tragic public safety implications. By using substandard materials and design approaches in the development of public buildings, cities and towns are putting their citizens and their employees at risk. When cost cutting leads to insufficient ventilation in public buildings, the health of employees and visitors is imperiled. When inferior materials are used, there is an increased risk of potentially deadly structural failure.

And the problem isn't restricted to new structures. Across Massachusetts – indeed, across the United States – budget shortfalls are causing many government entities to turn a blind eye to dangerously substandard conditions that exist in many of its existing facilities – particularly those not frequented by the public. The compromises that cities and towns are making for the sake of economy imperil many workers and citizens who provide public services, including the firefighters and police officers on whom we rely for our safety. It is the height of irresponsibility to permit these hazardous buildings to go into, or continue in, service and then cross our fingers, hoping that there will never be a deadly accident or related health problems.

Wait or Create?

So what can cities and towns do to avoid these hazards? There are some potential strategies for addressing these problems that warrant consideration: Wait, privatize or consolidate.

If the need for a new public building isn't urgent, municipalities may be better off waiting until there are sufficient funds to

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do the job right. Cities and towns can create a fund specifically identified for a particular project and regularly contribute to that fund until there is enough money to pay for the development of a building that will be safe and will last for decades to come. While the bottom-line cost of the building may rise in the time it takes to save enough money for its construction, the short- and long-term advantages significantly outweigh the cost of inflation.

If the need is more immediate, cities and towns can pursue a public/private partnership. This approach is becoming increas-

ingly common. Through these partnerships, municipalities and private entities share both the cost of development and the use of the structure. For instance, private investors can help pay for the development of a public housing project in return for being able to earn revenues from residents' rents. In "Infrastructure 2007," the Urban Land Institute predicts that public/private partnerships will become common for the development of schools, hospitals, public housing and other types of projects, including highways and public utilities.

A strategy from the business world that has application to municipal services and fa-

cilities is the consolidation between cities and towns to reduce duplication and increase efficiency. The benefit of sharing capital and life-cycle costs across a greater number of taxpayers is obvious, but often hostage to political considerations.

For too long, cities and towns have gambled with the health and welfare of their citizens and municipal employees for the sake of saving a few bucks today. The time has come for municipal planners and officials to open their eyes to the risks of ignoring their infrastructure needs, and the irresponsibility of pushing the majority of the burden onto future generations. ■