

Facilities Reinvestment: A Better Case for Deferred Maintenance

by Jay Oschrin

When it comes to talking with the people in your organization who hold the purse strings, it pays to choose your words carefully. As facilities managers, we've all grown comfortable using the term *deferred maintenance* to refer to maintenance, repair, or replacement work that has been put off for one reason or another. But when we use the term in our presentations to governing boards and state organizations, we rarely get the reaction we hope for. We may receive some additional funding, but it's almost never enough to relieve us of our maintenance deficit—or to save us from making the same pitch the next year.

I've been thinking about this issue for some time, and it seems to me that one of the problems is the term *deferred maintenance* itself. If you remember *Cool Hand Luke*, you'll understand the problem. "What we have here is a failure to communicate."

Think about your presentation from the point of view of administrators or board members. While we are running through our list of deferred maintenance priorities, they hear us saying, "We know what needs to be done, but you've been too cheap to let us do our job properly. Because you've failed us in the past, we're saddled with this problem today." In other words, you've inadvertently made your listeners feel defensive, hardly a sound basis for cooperation.

Or they might think, "Well, these repairs have been deferred for at least a year or two now, and nothing catastrophic has happened." The obvious conclusion: why not defer most of them again since the likelihood of anything bad happening, at least based on the record, is slim.

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Or they'll fixate on the word *maintenance*. "Why oh why," they might say to themselves, "am I wasting my time worrying about replacing fan belts and furnace filters? Let's get on to something important." In fact, if that's all we're talking about when we use the term deferred maintenance, we are wasting their time.

While deferred maintenance does mean routine service, it also means making repairs that range from reglazing windows to repairing a roof. It includes replacing perfectly functioning components to address modern building standards, whether that includes meeting fire codes and ADA standards or installing double pane windows or a more efficient boiler. And it even encompasses retrofitting buildings to meet new institutional missions or mandates.

There's a lot more to deferred maintenance than meets the eye—especially when that eye belongs to a person who is not a facilities manager by training. And to make matters worse, when you use the term deferred maintenance, you're selling yourself short. You're conveying the impression that you're the kind of

person who gets so immersed in the details that you miss the big picture.

A better tactic would be to think and talk about these issues in terms that reflect your understanding of the scope of the project and that place the issues in a context that financial managers can better understand. The term of choice, I think, is *facilities reinvestment*.

Facilities reinvestment is a way for you to establish common ground. By introducing the conversation in terms of facilities reinvestment rather than deferred maintenance, you're shifting the focus of the conversation from your own to-do list to the larger institutional priorities that you both share. You're moving away from technical issues where you have all the competency to financial issues where you both have expertise.

Equally important, you're presenting your point in a forward-looking light. Deferred maintenance is a make-up game. Facilities reinvestment is about the future (figure 1). Money spent on deferred maintenance removes a deficit. Money spent on facilities reinvestment provides a return that can be measured in reduced operational expenditures, increased efficiency, and new market opportunities.

Couching your presentation in the terms of facilities reinvestment also enables you to draw on tools like the lifecycle audit that can help you distinguish between components that should be maintained, repaired, or replaced. Such tools can help you establish reasonable return on investment that can result from reinvestment.

You can argue that whether you use the phrase *deferred maintenance* or *facilities reinvestment*, you're talking about the same thing. But in this time of tight budgets and fiscal austerity, it makes sense to make a distinction that could catch the attention—and the goodwill—of your audience.