

# PROPERTY MANAGEMENT

## Quarterly

### Maintenance

## Challenging lessons from deferred maintenance

*Pennywise, pound-foolish.  
A stitch-in-time saves nine.  
You can pay me now or you can pay me later.*

*Pick your poison.*

Idioms such as these may seem quaint, but they have a whole lot of meaning when it comes to the deferred maintenance of a commercial real estate property. As a building engineer and maintenance professional with decades of experience, I've practically seen it all when it comes to property owners who choose the quickest, easiest and cheapest solution to resolve a mechanical, electrical, plumbing or sometimes bigger problem, rather than biting the bullet and making the necessary investment to take care of the problem once and for all. Shortcut solutions (which involve the proverbial bubblegum and shoestring fix) to address building breakdowns are the easy way out and don't impact a bank account as much. But they can come with a much higher price tag down the road.

Before I get into my suggestions to avoid or at least ease the pain of writing a big check to take care of what likely could become a bigger problem, I thought I'd share a few "horror" stories. Hopefully they don't sound too familiar to you. And if they do, please read on to the end of this article.

■ **Eight feet of sewer line and a semitruck.** A downtown office



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building had a sewer line break at the building's foundation in the alley. After digging up the alley, the problem was quickly identified. Before the fracture was repaired, I suggested that the 8-foot sewer line be replaced.

Of course, this would come at a higher price than simply fixing the pipe. The property owner decided against the higher expense, so the crack was repaired, the hole was filled and new pavement was laid. Less than a month later, the pipe broke again, not only doubling the time and expense of the repair work, but also the building owner had to work out an agreement with the alleyway neighbors to help unload their semitrucks filled with store products.

■ **Leak here, leak there, leaks everywhere.** Some of you may be familiar with the tale of the Little Dutch Boy who saved Holland by plugging a hole in the country's dike with his finger. He was heralded as a hero, but within days, leaks were spouting out everywhere. Building window systems can often present the same problem. In one particular instance, a window leak was discovered on the seventh floor of an office building (at least

that was where the obvious problem was). It was an easy fix at the time, with the application of caulk to the problem area. Unfortunately, the caulk didn't resolve the fact that the windows in the building were years past their prime and hadn't been adequately maintained since the time they were installed. Like the Little Dutch Boy, the building owner was soon confronted with window leaks everywhere, leading to a window system replacement.

■ **Chasing flickering lights.** Understandably a common complaint among tenants is burned-out lightbulbs or inconsistent lighting in a building. The fastest way to address these complaints is to send over a maintenance person with a ladder to screw in a new lightbulb. This solution is like a dog chasing its tail, as lights continue to go out (replacing cheap bulbs with cheap bulbs that don't last and perpetuate inconsistent lighting throughout the building) and alienate tenants. The better solution for the owner would be a lighting retrofit, which not only provides superior, consistent lighting but also saves on energy due to advancements in technology. To help with the investment, utilities offer rebates based on the scope of work.

Some of these stories may hit close to home, and lessons have been learned. Here's a checklist to keep in mind to avoid costly

repairs, or to at least soften the blow when they do arise:

- Think long term. By putting a maintenance plan and schedule in place for every aspect of a building, an owner can get the most out of the systems and avoid repair work that could have been avoided with a plan in place.

- Know your tenants. Too often, owners make their own determinations of what needs to be done to make their buildings comfortable and desirable when they should be getting that information from their tenants.

- Understand warranties and life expectancies. For example, if an HVAC system has a life expectancy of 20 years, based on 10 hours a day, don't expect it to reach its life expectancy if it's running 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

- Dig into building efficiencies. As a way to improve your property's performance, have qualified engineers and technicians examine the places where a building may be failing you.

- Identify qualified property management teams and vendors. These partnerships often come hand in hand, as the better/best property management teams have relationships with the most qualified and respected vendors.▲

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