

Why Things Never Seem To Get Fixed

--Jon Hiratsuka

People think of the maintenance department only when things break down. Preventive work on pumps or boilers goes unnoticed. If the heat fails three times during the winter, students want Grimsley Hobbs' house attached to the same heat pipes which service their dormitory.

The individual student judges maintenance by its speed and effectiveness in fixing his own broken window or restoring hot water to his dormitory. According to this criteria, the performance of maintenance is neither laudable nor terrible, but spotty.

Shore dormitory has been so overheated all year that residents have had to keep windows open and sleep with only a sheet even in 20 degree weather. In Binford water drips through the broken waterproofing underlying the upstairs shower areas and forms dangerous puddles on the floors below. On the other hand, small items such as light fixtures and window locks are fixed promptly. Binford and Shore coordinators said.

In Bryan most vacume cleaners are broken, to the dismay of residents desiring to clean their carpeted suites. Bathroom fans cannot be repaired due to a lack of spare parts. Clogged toilets and sinks are usually fixed the next day. Many residents have complained about insufficient heat, not knowing that thermostats are set for no higher than 68 degrees.

English runs short of hot water due to the limited capacity of its hot water tanks and the lowering of the hot water temperature from 160 to 140 degrees.

Milner has had sporadic heating failures: 2nd North especially has had problems with cold showers. Several interns said service was very slow at the beginning of the year, but it improved later in the year when maintenance was less busy. Desk lamps are not repaired since required parts are no longer made.

Other instances of prompt repairs, delayed repairs, or neglected problems could be cited.

Reasons for maintenance's shortcomings include bureaucracy, the lack of manpower, parts, and money, the relations between maintenance head Ron Keene and dorm residents, the lack of residents' control over their dwellings, and the college's unwillingness to invest in major repairs.

To get something replaced or fixed involves red tape. A student fills out a "pink slip" or referral form. His intern or dorm coordinator signs it and takes it to housing director George Scholtz who in turn takes it to Keene.

Routinely then, a student's request passes through the hands of three people, and a week may elapse between the student's submitting the request and the actual repair. Each person in the referral chain claims to pass the pink slips he receives on to the next individual within 1-2 days, though they admit lapses.

Keene claims that, with certain exceptions, requests are acted upon within 1-2 days after he receives them. Emergencies are reported and acted upon more quickly. Low priority items such as closet doors for students' rooms may be neglected. If vandalism is suspected (broken windows, damaged room doors), repairs are usually not made until the culprit can be found and billed.

No formal channels exist for conveying this or any other information back to the person submitting a request, however. He has no way of knowing if maintenance got his request. He usually is not told if maintenance deems his request invalid, or if repair is delayed due to a backlog of work orders, a lack of spare parts, or other reasons.

Furthermore, if maintenance works on a problem and mistakenly assumes they have corrected it, one has no way of letting them know the problem remains.

A student is discouraged from going to the maintenance department personally to

request or inquire about repairs. If a repair is not made, his only formal recourse is to fill out another pink slip each day and hope that his coordinator or Scholtz can exercise some suasion or secure some explanation. But the student who continues to shiver under a cold shower while receiving no explanation is more likely to give up and conclude maintenance is indifferent or incompetent.



Maintenance chief Ron Keene

While the standard referral system and the maintenance department's general inaccessibility inconvenience students, they simplify maintenance's handling of complaints. Keene can receive students' pink slips in a bulk, once a day, from Scholtz only. Keene claimed correctly that he is too busy to personally receive and answer complaints from individual students, and that maintenance cannot afford to hire a full time person to process complaints. He admitted that a system better than the present referral process is needed, but he said he didn't know what it would be.

Keene himself is the source of much controversy. A number of people have said that the maintenance head is difficult to work with. When repairs are not made, they hesitate to contact Keene directly and complain too insistently for fear of getting on his bad side. They fear he would then be more unwilling to fulfill their requests.

Several students have reported unpleasant personal encounters with Keene. Some claimed he seemed indifferent to student concerns.

Some residents in the Frazier Apartments claimed Keene and his crew stole and destroyed property and entered their dwellings without permission.

When interviews, Keene

did not appear to have horns. He admitted his crew has accidentally slashed garden hoses while mowing Frazier lawns. He denied that his men are authorized to enter the apartments when the residents are not home unless a request form is signed. He volunteered that one employee thought a lawn mower standing in a yard was junk and took it away. The mower was junked before the owner

could claim it; after 6 months and much inconvenience, he was reimbursed.

Keene challenged those making accusations to identify themselves and speak out publicly or go to the civil authorities. They have not done so, partly because they fear Keene will make things difficult for them (perhaps by fining them at the end of the year, ostensibly for not leaving their apartments clean), partly because they have little concrete evidence.

There is then some suspicion but little proof of dishonesty and petty sabotage on the part of maintenance. There is also some attempt to crucify Keene on the basis of his personality.

It is debatable whether Keene gets revenge on people by intentionally delaying repairs they want, or whether hearsay and Keene's undiplomatic dealings with some individuals give him this undeserved reputation. However, this reputation does work to his advantage in that it keeps many people away from the admittedly busy man.

It is true, however, that dorm coordinators who are on good terms with Keene are more likely to receive explanations from him when repairs cannot be made quickly.

Perhaps the controversy over Keene the man obscures a more fundamental cause of conflict. The maintenance

department sees its task primarily as the physical upkeep of the facilities; whereas students see the job as one of making dwellings more livable. They almost look upon maintenance as a service to students.

Keene and his staff of 8 full time and 6 part time employees are responsible for buildings and ground, faculty homes, rental property, and many acres of college land; so they can truthfully say they cannot attend to everything at once.

Yet, in their choice of priorities, conception of problems primarily in mechanical terms, and failure to consult those affected by their actions, their orientation towards the physical plant as opposed to the residents shows.

Keene said that they have held off replacing the admittedly inadequate heat controls in Shore this long due to cost. He and Jim Newlin knew that if windows in the rooms containing the dorm's thermostats are opened, the whole dorm will overheat. But they did not know how much discomfort this entails for residents.

Much ill feeling results from the fact that residents have little say in maintenance decisions which affect them.

English dorm residents resented it when, without warning, their couch was taken to be re-covered. On the other hand, they appreciated being told one day in advance that their water would be turned off for several hours while a water fountain was being installed.

The furniture in Shore lobby was also re-covered, but many Shore residents would rather have had maintenance use this time and money to paint the kitchen or repair the plumbing in it.

The run down state of some of the equipment and systems servicing the dorms also complicates maintenance's task. Repeated breakdowns necessitate stopgap repairs; replacement or overhaul of major equipment is costly. Last summer the heat pipes were replaced at a cost of \$40,000. Before this was done, English experienced periodic heating failures. This summer defective waterproofing in the Binford shower areas will be replaced.

The following suggestions for improving maintenance's effectiveness and maintenance-student relations will be put forth.

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