



# JOINT OBSTACLE

A City and School District Join Forces for New Facility  
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# Protect Your Investment: Don't Cut the M&O Budget

By William S. DeJong

Conditions in world financial markets have improved and activity in the U.S. housing sector has increased, but the economy is still not good for school districts. Many are making substantial budget cuts, often including maintenance and operations.

It's pretty obvious that school districts must maintain their facilities to protect the investments they've already made in new construction and major renovations. However, it's often not easy to convince the people who hold the purse strings. That's why it's time to look to the past for lessons learned.

The current situation is reminiscent of the early 1980s. During that economic downturn of double-digit inflation, school districts experienced many of the same circumstances: money was short, enrollment was declining and maintenance and operations budgets had to compete with other operating costs, such as rising utility bills and teachers' salaries. This resulted in fewer custodians and maintenance staff, as well as materials and supplies. It also gave new meaning to the term "deferred maintenance."

Unfortunately, the deferred maintenance of the 1980s is a major reason so many buildings were replaced or renovated during the past decade.

One of the more dramatic examples of this situa-



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tion was a large middle school in an urban district of the Midwest. I visited the school in the early 1990s and witnessed what happens when the maintenance and operations budget is cut.

The school had an indoor pool, but the filtration system had failed. No funds had been set aside to fix the filtration system, so the pool closed. Within several months the pool was drained and the building's heating system was turned off. After going through a winter without heat, the roof failed. Not only did this ruin the ceiling, but it also caused rapid decay within the interior. The district had two choices: undergo a major renovation or replace the pool. This is a perfect example of short-term savings having a long-term cost effect.

Recently the Council of Educational Facility Planners International bestowed an award on an urban school for undergoing a comprehensive facility planning process resulting in educational facilities that serve the needs of students, staff and the community. Indeed, it was a great project.

Ironically, I visited the school several months prior to the award and was surprised to find five-foot weeds surrounding the building, as well as other evidence that the building, even though brand new, was not being properly maintained. Unfortunately, there is often a mentality that a new school doesn't need ongoing maintenance. But like a new car, it will eventually fall apart if it doesn't undergo proper maintenance.

Several states have attempted to protect school facility investments by requiring local districts to implement maintenance plans that establish sinking funds and/or earmark tax revenues for maintenance and operations. Unfortunately, not enough states have mandated these requirements, which mean insufficient funds are allocated for maintenance and operations.

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Budgets are tight and school districts are caught between a rock and a hard place. There is no cookie-cutter answer to this problem, yet the overall premise is clear: further maintenance and operations budget cuts will have negative long-term consequences.

This is certainly not the time to cut the maintenance and operations budget because short-term savings have a long-term effect. It's imperative that we learn from our past to protect our facility investments now.

William S. DeJong, Ph.D., REFP, is CEO of DeJONG, an educational facility-planning firm based in Dublin, Ohio.



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**A:** Clients are probably the No. 1 driver of change. A few years ago, I was at an academic institution and the president of the institution came to me and said he had heard a lot of people talking about BIM and wanted to know why. So, I went to survey my colleagues' market interest, called a bunch of people and asked what was going on with their practices and whether they were looking at BIM. Many of them said, "Well, we have heard that the U.S. General Services Administration is going to require projects to be done using BIM, so we're going to do it."

The GSA is the biggest owner in this country. So, the owner's voice has been heard very clearly and strongly.

**Q:** What are some other hot topics surrounding BIM right now?

**A:** One of the hot topics is interoperability. People always ask about that. If you look at BIM as being a multiple-vendor universe of options, how do you navigate it? Just within the Autodesk products, people want to know how to get from authoring their model to doing sustainable analysis to making a movie to show a client.

There is one format, gbXML, which is for green building. It was invented by Autodesk, but now it is managed by a consortium. Autodesk is a participant, but doesn't control it. We want it to be open as a standard. Our products will write a gbXML file that can then be read by other programs for sustainability analysis. That is something people want to be able to understand how to do.

**Q:** As an open, continuously updated database, who is ultimately responsible?

**A:** The American Institute of Architects and the Associated General Contractors of America, which is connected to ConsensusDOCS, have helped out with this question by developing a set of documents that cover integrated projects.

One answer is to look at those groups, because they have BIM documents that lay out a project in detail: If you want to work jointly, here is the way someone should manage the process. However, that's not the way you have to do it, so other companies have created their own approach.

Some firms are really open. I think it's something that has to be negotiated on the project, but it can go many different ways.

**Q:** On the owner's side, is there an increased risk of unrealistic expectations?

**A:** I think owners are expecting more because of growing awareness. At a conference I attended this month for commercial developers, several people came up to me and asked about BIM and were wondering if it would be appropriate for different kinds of projects.

People know enough about it now to know that it's valuable. They aren't at the point yet where they're specifying it. I think owner demand will increase, but I don't know that expectations will ever spiral out of control.

Erin Rae Hoffer is an architect and industry programs manager with Autodesk Inc. She is a LEED-accredited professional with more than 25 years of experience in computer-aided design.

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