

June 17, 2016

Carole Smith/Board of Education
Portland Public Schools
501 N. Dixon St
Portland, OR 97227

Re: Portland Public Schools Facilities Department, in response to lead discoveries in water

Dear Carole Smith and the Portland Public Schools Board of Education,

As a former employee in Portland Public Schools' (PPS) Facilities and Asset Management department (FAM), I am writing to give you a close-up perspective and context as you dive into the investigation and strive to gain understanding of the how the current state of FAM has come to pass. This comes now at a time when PPS is in the center of a public outcry regarding the way it handled (or didn't handle) the results of high lead levels in the water. I want to preface what I am about to share by stating that I do not know the specific circumstances around recent events. However, as a former Sr. Maintenance Manager and Project Manager in FAM, I can provide some context under which those events took place. My intention is not to make light of the severity of this situation or diminish the validity of the anger, frustration, and disappointment felt by the community PPS serves, as well as by its own staff.

Everyone is aware that PPS has a severely underfunded Facilities department. The cumulative effects of Measure 5, former Leadership's decisions, and a pervasive "sweep it under the rug" mentality have left Facilities in a no win situation. The Board and Public do not fully comprehend the actual impact this has on the learning environment, the safety of the students and staff, and the level of service Facilities can provide.

After the drastic budget cuts beginning in the late 90s, the former maintenance workforce that was around 250 strong was slashed to around 50 workers. The former \$13 million maintenance budget was dramatically reduced and preventative maintenance was formally eliminated. Currently, the maintenance budget is approximately \$8.8 million annually and the workforce has built back up to around 85. That is roughly 68% of the previous budget and only 34% of the workforce. Unfortunately, what wasn't slashed by a comparable amount were the Board and Public's expectations of what services Facilities could, should, and would be expected to provide. Their expectations never reflected the new reality that these changes created.

PPS owns and operates over 100 buildings with a total of 8.7 million square feet. This is a general breakdown of approximate funding allocations in the Operations department:

Total Maintenance Budget = \$8.8 million

- Personnel/workforce wages = \$7.5 million
- Leaving **\$1.3 million for actual repairs/services; \$0.15/sf of building**

Total Health& Safety (H&S) budget = \$300,000

- Personnel wages = \$227,000
- Leaving **\$73,000 for all H&S repairs/services; \$0.008/sf of building**

Total Custodial budget = \$20 million

- Personnel wages = \$11.4 million
- Leaving **\$8.6 million to cover all supply purchases and custodial overtime or \$0.99/sf of building**

When the numbers are broken out it paints a pretty dismal picture and becomes apparent that Facilities is swimming against a strong current with no real possibility of ever coming out on top.

In the last year or so, I am one of at least 12 FAM employees that decided to leave the District and seek other career opportunities. The majority of us left for self-preservation's sake. We saw the writing on the wall, were underrepresented and unsupported, and recognized the personal and professional threats we could (and did) face all the while knowing that Leadership would never have our backs. Of the 12 that have left, it has included: the Director of Operations, Director of Project Management, energy/utility manager, code compliance manager, two senior maintenance managers, two maintenance foremen, and several project managers. Many of these positions are still vacant, some of which have taken over a year to fill. Meanwhile, current staff is forced to assume additional roles and responsibilities to try and keep providing services to the schools.

Case in point, Andy Fridley has not only been responsible for his own workload as Sr. Manager of Health and Safety, but also assumed the responsibilities of the vacant Director of Operations position (his direct report) for the last year and that of another vacant Sr. Manager's duties. This is Leadership's expectation; to "step up". This often comes with no additional compensation or **you** have to self-advocate for an inadequate stipend that doesn't come near to fair compensation for the additional responsibilities and time involved. This is the norm that all FAM staff faces day in and day out.

To Andy's credit, despite carrying a triple workload, and while wearing his "Director of Operations' hat", he drafted and submitted the annual Operations' budget request. In January, he asked for \$6.5 million *in additional funds for Operations*. This was to hire 40 additional custodians, 8 additional maintenance positions, increase funds towards additional resources, and upgrade ancient fleet equipment. The response from the Board and Administration was to provide \$450,000 for Maintenance supply funds and to hire one additional worker for the upcoming fiscal year. Needless to say, this was incredibly disappointing to the "boots on the ground" staff but in no way a surprise as it is the story that is repeated year after year. The \$450,000 allocation was changed at the March 29th Board meeting when the Administration committed to test water in schools this summer and now all of the \$450,000 will go solely towards lead in water testing.

One of the systemic issues that limit FAM's effectiveness is the prioritization of its limited resources. The running theme is whoever barks loudest gets the attention. This may be principals, staff, parents, or the media. All it takes is an email or phone call to the right person or the insinuation that such a call will be placed if FAM doesn't make it happen, to get something bumped to the top of the list, regardless of where it lies on the 'official' priority list, which does prioritize health and safety, and warm and dry, secondly impact to classrooms, and last would be everything else. Project managers are assigned more

projects than are humanly possible to oversee and are constantly being derailed by small specialty project requests that fall outside the priorities - such as painting a principal's office, rearranging administrative cubicles, or overseeing volunteer projects. They cannot dedicate the time needed for the more substantial projects that have greater impact to safety and the learning environment. Imagine the frustration of the Project Management and Operations teams to see Leadership not enforce common sense parameters to vet project requests in order to prioritize use of the limited resources available. That would have meant telling someone "no", and that is not part of the current culture. During my time there, it was discouraged to elevate issues to Leadership, and certainly never to elevate above your direct report.

As an example of the additional responsibilities that Facilities is forced to assume, consider the Arts tax initiative and the revenue PPS receives to support Arts in schools. There is no question that Arts are vital to a well-rounded education. The tax however and corresponding budget allocations that followed its passing did not cover resulting expenses incurred on its behalf. Facilities was responsible for updating mechanical and electrical infrastructure and purchasing new kilns to support the reinstated Arts program; new drama programs want to use theaters that are not safe and no money has been allocated to make the necessary repairs; the number of schools with music programs is on the rise but there was no thought to providing additional musical instruments or repair technicians. No additional funding was received to cover these expenses so FAM redirected funding from other urgent maintenance related repairs.

Leadership is aware of the intrinsic dysfunction between maintenance and custodial staff and management. They know there are nowhere near enough staff and resources to handle the workload. Yet, when push comes to shove, the go to scapegoat is to insist that incompetent, lazy workers alone are the reason Operations cannot keep up with work orders and its expected duties. This has created an atmosphere ripe with contempt and frustration in the shops. While I will say that there are definitely former and current workers that fit that charge, the majority of the workers want to do their jobs, be treated with respect, and given a voice to input their ideas, allowing them to take ownership of their work.

The maintenance crew doesn't trust the District and the District doesn't trust the maintenance crew. This dynamic has festered since the budget/staff reductions began and has created a toxic and hostile work environment which gets in the way of getting actual work done. No one has yet to find a comprehensive, sustainable solution to remedy these toxic relations. Management staff is defenseless to any and all claims that those toxic few allege against them. This triggers endless Human Resources investigations that typically end up finding the allegations are completely unsubstantiated. However, even when staff are cleared through the investigation, HR and Leadership impose action plans that contradict their findings and puts the onus on the wrongly accused to "fix it" even though "it" was deemed to be unfounded. A lot of time, money, and mental capacity has and will continue to be spent in vain. There are no consequences to those that make false accusations.

Custodial staffing levels are below the bare minimum needed to cover the shift demands. There is a revolving door of custodians that leave and new staff that have to be trained every month. The managers that oversee the custodial staffing work tirelessly to make sure there's someone to unlock the schools every morning. There is no reserve pool of custodians to draw from. Oftentimes, they personally have to open schools themselves at 5 a.m. when custodians call in last minute to say they won't be there that day. They have to answer to principals and staff when they are asked why their custodial staff

can't do more or be as responsive as they expect. It is, like most FAM positions, a thankless job where you are left apologizing for factors outside of your control every day because Leadership does not accurately represent FAM and its current threshold for services to the staff and Public.

To see, Andy, a dedicated employee of 28 years, within reach of his hard earned 30 year retirement mark, placed on administrative leave, is heart-wrenching. Andy is a hard-working, dedicated employee that has witnessed the rampant devastation over the years in FAM and is being held accountable for historic issues that precede his two year tenure as the Sr. Manager of Health & Safety. Of course, he was as frustrated and disillusioned as most are in FAM, but he held fast to the mission and kept forging ahead trying to keep the boat afloat and put out fires. Placing him on leave is another futile decision on the Board's part that continues to undermine the greater good of Facilities. This is a systemic failure that is comprised of many factors and I fear that a 30 day investigation won't even begin to understand them, let alone "fix" them.

This is the context under which FAM operates on a daily basis and under which the recent events occurred. My intention is to increase the Board and Public's understanding of the conditions under which Facilities operates, and speak up for the folks that have to fight this no-win battle every day, since their voices cannot be heard without fear of repercussion. Until the FAM's budget and staff levels align with the Board and Public's service expectations, Facilities will continue to fall short of meeting them.

Respectfully,



Sharon Raymor
*Former PPS Sr. Maintenance Manager
& Project Manager*

CC: Steve Berman, Stoll Berne
Rob Manning, OPB News