5 STEPS

EVERY PROPERTY MANAGER

SHOULD TAKE TO IMPROVE MAINTENANCE

By Jeffrey S. Lapin, CPM

As a certified instructor teaching IREM's maintenance course (now called *Managing Maintenance Operations and Property Risk*) and BOMA's *Design, Operation and Maintenance of Building Systems, Part I* course, I am often asked by students how to improve the maintenance at their properties.

Most property managers have an informal maintenance program at their properties which often consists of a combination of in-house and contractor-provided repairs and maintenance procedures for HVAC, roof, electrical, plumbing and other systems. This approach, while common, is not sufficient to ensure that both preventive and corrective maintenance is done consistently, correctly per the manufacturer's recommendations, at the correct intervals, and in such a way that it does more good than harm.

Moreover, many property managers do inspections of their properties on a more or less informal basis and do not always document the results and the follow-up items. While this approach is also common, it does not provide the property manager, supervisor or property owner with a sufficient paper trail in the event that a written record of such inspections and follow-up is needed for a legal claim or other reasons.

Following are the five initial steps that I recommend every property manager—despite the type of property managed—do as a starting point for a solid property maintenance and risk management plan:

STEP 1:

DETERMINE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES FOR THE MAINTENANCE PLAN

How do you know if you are achieving the goals and objectives of your maintenance and risk management plan if you do not have set goals and objectives for the plan? It's like trying to drive from point A to point B without knowing where point B is. You will end up driving aimlessly.

First, map out the goals and objectives of your plan, guided by the owner of the property. The owner's input is key because (a) It's their property and their invested funds; and (b) They know what the overall objectives are for the property and why they purchased it. You will likely need to guide them through the options, but in the end, we exist to help our owners meet their objectives for the asset. Start by meeting with the property owner and asking the following questions:

(1) How long do you anticipate holding this property?
(2) Is immediate cash flow more important to you than long-term value appreciation?

This will tell you whether your plan should aim to do the minimum required to keep an old piece of equipment limping along or whether you should focus on replacing old, energy-inefficient equipment that could be repaired with newer, more efficient equipment that has a three-to-five-year projected payback period.

Take the following example about determining maintenance for a building's roof: If it's an older roof with a lot of leaks or trapped moisture between layers, or if it is not energy-efficient, you will likely have to either recommend a new roof or continue to baby the old one. If the owner plans to sell the property within the next year or two, he or she may prefer to maintain the existing roof and let the buyer deal with it.

You may suggest that a savvy buyer will likely deduct the cost of the new roof from the purchase price anyway. And in such a case, the owner would be better off in many cases to reroof now and enjoy the operational savings. But if the directive from ownership is not to spend the money on a new roof, then the objectives for your maintenance plan will be to keep that old roof as watertight as it can be.

STEP 2:

DETERMINE BASELINE MAINTENANCE CONDITION BY CONDUCTING A TOP-TO-BOTTOM INSPECTION WITH WRITTEN RESULTS

Once the goals and objectives for the plan have been determined and translated into clear, specific language that will be incorporated into the beginning of the plan, you can begin to determine your property's baseline (starting) condition. This is done by conducting a thorough, roof-to-basement inspection with your team, which will then be documented via a written inspection form.

Your initial or baseline inspection should follow a logical sequence, methodically inspecting and noting the condition of each and every "maintainable" element of the property from top to bottom. Be as specific as you can about how things are at the start of the new plan. This will help you measure your progress in meeting the goals and objectives of the plan. And always use a detailed written checklist—which should be distributed to the entire team—and copied and placed into your permanent files, along with photos, diagrams, etc.

One other note about this step—do not assess blame for how things are today. You need to take a leadership role and make clear that the new maintenance plan and procedures will start now with no need or desire to point a finger at those responsible for current conditions. On the other hand, if rapid and measureable improvements toward meeting the plan objectives are not realized, it will then be time to determine the cause and make changes where needed.

STEP 3:

IDENTIFY EACH COMPONENT AT THE PROPERTY WITH UNIQUE LABELING

>> LABEL: Now that you have physically inspected and identified each item to be included in the maintenance and risk management plan, it's time to give each item a unique identifier, if possible. For the maintenance plan to work, you need to know what you're maintaining.

In other words, if there are three chilled water circulation pumps for Building #2, physically label each pump with a unique name and number—for example, pump number one in Building 2 might be BLDG2CWCP1. It really does not matter how you determine the identifiers. Find a nomenclature that makes sense to you and your maintenance team members and start labeling.

>> GET SPECIFIC: The function of such labeling is twofold. First, it allows you to quickly and correctly reference each item in your plan if maintenance is needed. So for instance, if during your inspections, you see that the aforementioned chilled water circulation pump (Pump #1 in Building #2) is found to be leaking water on the floor, you can simply reference that exact piece of equipment on your inspection form instead of noting that "one of the pumps is leaking."

>> TRACK MAINTENANCE: The second purpose of such labeling is to carefully track when preventive or corrective maintenance has occurred to that specific piece of equipment—the aforementioned pump, for instance. Labeling your machinery ensures you can easily reference the maintenance that has occurred (or not occurred) on that pump when it's found leaking, thereby easily pinpointing the likely cause of the failure.

STEP 4:

ASSIGN RESPONSIBILITY AND OBTAIN MANUFACTURERS' RECOMMENDED MAINTENANCE PROCEDURES

Once the baseline condition of all these elements is documented and each item has been given a unique identifier, it's time to assign responsibility for each component (HVAC, roof, electrical, landscaping, parking surfaces, etc.) to an individual. Now each assigned person—in addition to being held accountable—will take ownership of that element and be less likely to defer to others.

Each assigned person should then obtain the specific maintenance procedures recommended for that equipment. This will include the frequency of recommended preventive cycles and the individual steps that should be included in each maintenance cycle (e.g. visually inspect the evaporator coils for dirt). This is no different than taking out your automobile owner's manual and finding what the car's manufacturer recommends for frequency of oil changes, type of oil and the specific procedures for draining the old oil, replacing the filter and refilling with fresh oil.

Take the manufacturers' specific recommendations and put them right into your maintenance and risk management plan sections for HVAC, plumbing, electrical, etc.

But what about non-mechanical items such as light fixture maintenance or parking lot maintenance? Obviously, you will not find the manufacturer's specific maintenance recommendations for maintenance of your lighting fixtures or your asphalt parking lots. But you will find recommendations from industry trade groups such as the Asphalt Institute, for instance, which is the international trade association of petroleum asphalt producers and manufacturers.

STEP 5:

ADDRESS HEALTH AND SAFETY ISSUES AS A PRIORITY

The final step is determining how to address the results found in the baseline inspection or subsequent follow-up inspections. Doing all the work it takes to set up our plan objectives, inspect the property and document all the maintenance procedures is worthless if you do not then follow up and address what was found.

So what should be tackled first? The things that are likely to result in the most risk are those that affect the health and safety of tenants, visitors and invitees to the property. For instance, a trip-and-fall or slip-and-fall condition—the most likely causes of expensive personal injury law suits—should be addressed immediately.

That means that if, during inspection, you discover a crack in the asphalt surface of the parking lot which is reasonably likely to cause an unsuspecting pedestrian to fall and injure himself, the property manager should stop and have it addressed before moving on. In practical terms, that means getting someone to go and get traffic cones, caution tape or other highly visible barricade material and create a physical barrier to prevent someone from tripping on it until it can be properly fixed.

Similarly, if you find during an inspection that an industrial building tenant has been storing drums of chemicals marked "Hazardous Materials," and several appear to be leaking onto unprotected ground, you need to act immediately but may not be able to fully rectify the problem right then and there. In such cases, documentation of the findings (for instance, photos, an incident report and notifications to the tenant and property owner) is crucial to establishing that the property manager took reasonable actions to minimize the threat to the public.

YOUR INITIAL OR BASELINE INSPECTION SHOULD FOLLOW A LOGICAL SEQUENCE, methodically inspecting and noting the condition of each and every "maintainable" element of the property from top to bottom.

TAKE THE FIRST STEP

Sometimes, the most daunting thing about fixing a problem like poor maintenance is admitting that you have a problem and getting help. Property managers are very busy and don't have much spare time. So just the idea of creating a detailed property maintenance and risk management plan with all the steps outlined here can be daunting and turn into a "someday" project.

But if you follow the steps here, starting with identification of the goals and objectives for the plan; determining the baseline condition of the property; identifying the property elements that need to be maintained; assigning responsibility and gathering the manufacturers' recommendations for maintenance; and then, prioritizing the items that affect health and safety, you will be past the dreaded step of getting started. Then, it's just a matter of continuously improving.

And the great news is that IREM is here to help you. The forms you'll need for conducting detailed inspections, inventorying equipment and even setting up the maintenance procedures can often be found at ***www.irem.org***. Moreover, the members of IREM are a great resource for you, starting with your chapter's leadership team. ■

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