



Flint Memorial Library, North Reading, Massachusetts

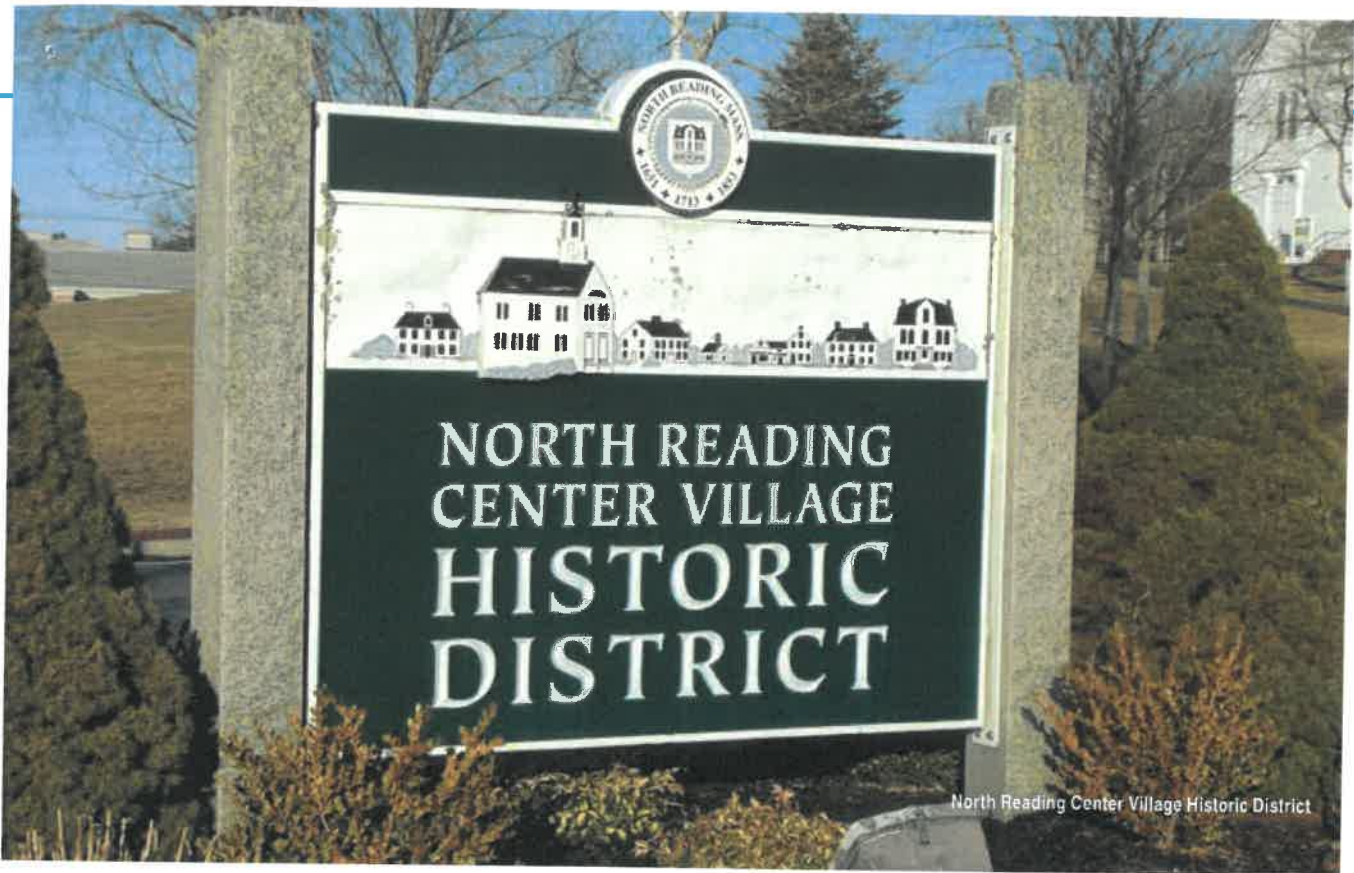
Historic building preservation costs strain municipal budgets

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It is no secret that the northeast territory of the United States is rich with structures of early nineteenth century architectural design. Craftsmen from the 1800s used local timber, slate and stone to erect structures of grand significance. Government buildings in support of civic, penal and educational stature were built. Many of these grand designs continue to operate today funded by municipal and state budgets. Sadly, several New England historic structures have met their demise due to lack of maintenance and funding. Communities are experiencing a significant amount of growth in population which places

heavy demands on municipal infrastructure. Over one hundred years of environmental change is having a major impact on facilities maintenance budgets. Historic embellishments of soaring stairwells, massive archways and single-pane glass leave a lasting impression on visitors; however, they also make for grand energy bills. There is ultimately no money left in maintenance budgets to fund expensive building preservation projects.

Nestled in the Historic District of North Reading, Mass., stands a beautiful four-story Second Empire-style building



adorned with a mansard slate roof, oversized windows and grand entryways:

Harriett N. Flint purchased the land and erected a war memorial dedicated to the memory of her late husband, Charles F. Flint, which she presented as a “free gift” to the town in 1875. The building was designed to be an income-producing Town House with space allotted to the Flint Memorial Library that Mrs. Flint had established in 1872. (Eaton, 250th Anniversary of Ancient Redding, Reading, Mass., 1896 Middlesex Registry of Deeds and Probate North Reading Town Reports)

The Flint Memorial building has a recommended maintenance plan to prime, paint and caulk the exterior clapboards every five to eight years. Yikes, that is a hefty expense for any maintenance budget to absorb, especially in consideration of the 7,500 square feet of hardwood clapboard that covers the exterior of the North Reading Flint Memorial Library building. Research of alternative siding materials reveals several long-term maintenance pitfalls. Shrinkage, cracks, fading, discoloration and mold are evident on building projects that opted to strip off hardwoods and replace with alternative materials such as fiber cement board, aluminum and composite materials. Though many of the alternatives boast lower maintenance costs, the materials desecrate the historic look of the building.

Groups like the North Reading Historic District Commission weigh in on the best materials that will preserve the historic integrity of old buildings like the Flint Memorial Library. Historic perseveration groups make a valid argument in support of the protection of historic architecture. It’s not only a protection for the buildings but a governance of historic significance:

Throughout Massachusetts, cities and towns face the needless destruction of their treasured historic resources. Village centers, neighborhoods and downtowns are often not very well protected, and through demolitions and insensitive alterations can easily disappear. However, many cities and towns in Massachusetts have taken steps to better protect their historic resources by establishing a Historic District, provided for by Massachusetts General Law. (North Reading Historic District Commission Design Guidelines, 2008, p2)

Facilities managers have their crosses to bear in the development of capital budgets. Consideration of long-term environmental change is critically important to sustain municipal budgets. Will the equipment offer longevity and efficiencies while maintaining historic value? Time-consuming as it may be, as ambassadors of public funds it should be part of every facility manager’s charge to implement building systems that won’t leave future generations in a financial lurch. Finding new ways to balance maintenance and capital budgets requires managers to think outside the box, research new technologies vs. old, and work collaboratively with community organizations.

Many energy-efficient options have entered the market to offset building preservation costs. Though the continuous upkeep of historic materials is costly, municipalities should look to the reduction of energy consumption to balance budgets. A variety of products related to LED lighting, water conservation, window glass replacement, insulation and HVAC controls are available and will result in a quick return on investment. Most utility service providers offer both residential and commercial energy-saving programs from equipment rebates to peak shedding opportunities. Immedi-


ate drops in energy consumption result in instant savings on energy bills. This type of savings will assist in the reallocation of funds that could be used for preservation efforts.

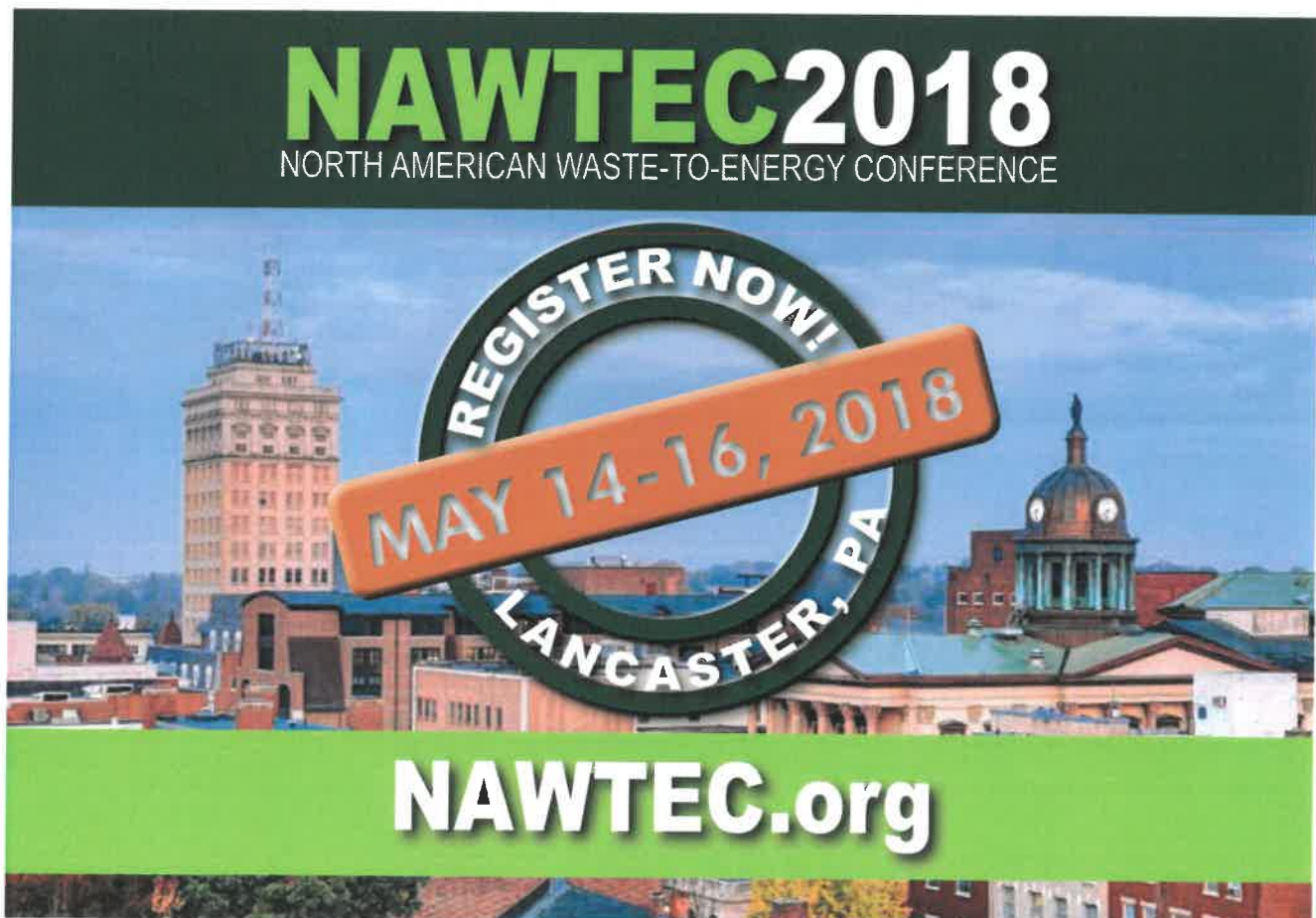
State-funded grants are another avenue to reduce the cost of historic building preservation. Though the grant process is complex and lengthy to work through, funds are available to assist in preservation projects related to single-pane glass replacement, slate roof replacement and building restoration projects. This type of funding is highly competitive due to a limited amount of funds. Planning, attention to specifics, and meeting deadlines are critical elements of obtaining grant funding.

Every siding material has a maintenance cost. In comparison to hardwood siding, fiber cement board exhibits several positive maintenance features: fire retardant, bug resistance, and it is painted less frequently. Facilities managers need to fully vet materials prior to backing costly building replacement projects. What are the long-term implications of using specific products and will the material preserve historic integrity? Will today's manufactured materials perform as well as the materials used in yesteryear, such as cedar clapboard? It is possible that early nineteenth century builders knew a thing or two about structural design. Research reveals that manufactured materials are not maintenance free. All

building materials have long-term maintenance costs. Over the course of history environmental change is the largest variable in efforts to forecast the long-term capital needs of historic buildings.

Cedar clapboard has proven to last over one hundred years, when properly maintained. One hundred years from now the Flint Memorial Library will continue to stand in its grand elegance if the town opts to protect history. War memorials, monuments, historic buildings and old burial grounds are located in the trajectory of the course of history. It is the responsibility of the current generation to pass on well-maintained structures, with energy-efficient systems and the history that goes along with it. Climate and societal change are a real threat to future generations. Municipalities have a responsibility to implement sustainable programs that will support environmental change. Wouldn't it be great if one hundred years from now people say the managers of past generations knew a thing or two about sustainability?

Julie Spurr Knight has seventeen years of experience in building maintenance. Several of the buildings Julie manages are located in the Historic District of North Reading. Visit the Town of North Reading's Facilities Division website to view the functions managed by Julie: <https://www.northreadingma.gov/facilities-division>. She can be reached at (978) 664-6001. 



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