

Prioritizing Maintenance

Smart planning can keep your facility humming smoothly year-round

By Mark Wright

What better time than January to crack open a new calendar and take a 12-month look at your facility's maintenance needs? Planning maintenance tasks out for the entire year not only gives you a good grasp of what needs to be tackled when, but also helps you anticipate costs.

Thinking about your maintenance needs from both a "short-term" and "long-term" perspective is the simplest approach. Some things must be done right away, while others can sometimes be deferred for awhile.

"Short term tasks should focus on preventive maintenance and safety priorities, with an eye to conserving energy by installing timers, energy efficient lighting and the like," advises Charlotte Weber, senior project manager of Buffalo, New York-based Sovran/Uncle Bob's Self Storage. "Preventive maintenance includes daily, weekly, monthly and quarterly upkeep of gates, doors, carts, HVAC filters and such."

Weber points out that planning for long term maintenance projects provides a good opportunity to explore "green" alternatives. Sustainability is easier to achieve

when you have the time to think ahead and learn about options.

"Additionally, it's important to re-evaluate maintenance agreements for equipment, such as HVAC systems, elevators or dehumidification systems," she notes. "Careful consideration should be given to any project that will extend the useful life of an asset."

Sovran has facilities all over, but Weber says geographic location doesn't play a part in their maintenance planning. "All of our properties go through a thorough inspection by both the project managers and area managers throughout the year," she explains. "Those inspections provide the basis for the following year's projects."

Timing Can Be Important

On the other hand, different locations tend to have their own seasonal, weather-related considerations to face. Obviously, a facility in upstate New York won't be doing outside painting or driveway re-paving in February.

See Prioritizing Maintenance, p. 10

Prioritizing Maintenance, from page 9

Check manufacturer's specs before scheduling equipment installations, coating applications and other climate-sensitive chores. You'll want to know temperature and exposure tolerances before diving into those tasks.

In Littleton, Colorado, Columbine Mini Storage manager Michelle Spevak is dealing with frequent, strong winds, along with varying amounts of snowfall during winter months. Summers tend to be hot and dry.

"If we have a lot of snow, we know in the spring and summer we'll have a lot of maintenance, especially on our asphalt and fences," she says.

As a result of the uncertain conditions they face each year, maintenance planning for Columbine's 476-unit facility is tough. The fluctuations make maintenance prioritizing a "seat of the pants" process, Spevak observes. "I try to break it up as much as possible so I don't hit the owner with everything all at once."

A facility's age can certainly affect maintenance priorities, as well. "The remaining useful life, the effective age, and the average useful life of any asset are taken into consideration for planning projects," says Weber. "We do, however, implement energy-saving projects—such as upgrading lighting, motion sensors and timers, door sweeps, roof coatings and electrical upgrades—on a regular basis as new technology becomes available."

Deferring Maintenance

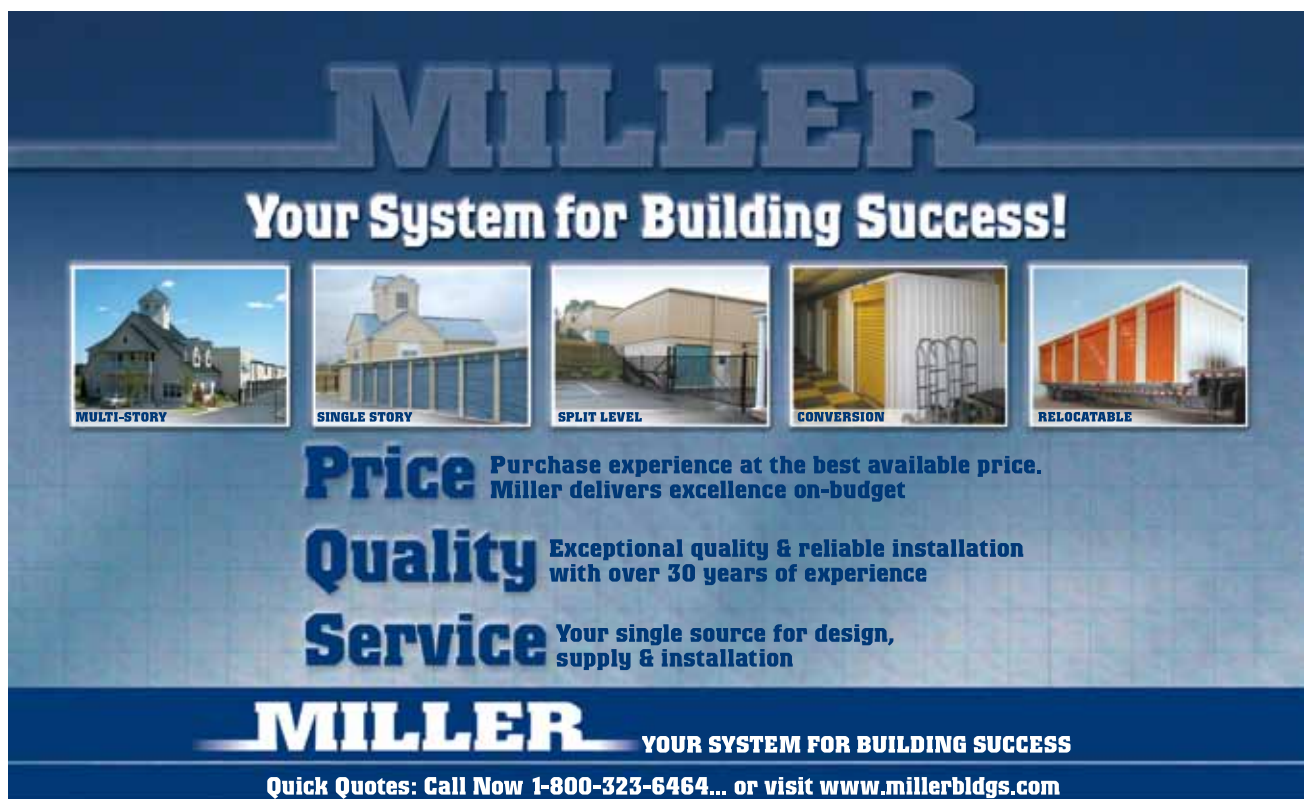
What maintenance tasks are a must no matter what? And what could a busy maintenance director or small mom-and-pop facility safely defer for awhile when crazy schedules or limited resources make "triage" the only option?

"Safety projects and code compliance issues always come first," observes Weber, "along with anything that affects the integrity of the property, such as deteriorating roofs, gutter issues, drainage issues, and the like."

Luckily, certain tasks are more optional than others. Weber cites painting (unless the existing paint is chipped, cracked or peeling), office upgrades, and replacement doors for low-demand units as examples of less time-sensitive projects. Be careful to protect your curb appeal, though, since that affects profitability.

Also, check equipment and other applicable warranties to make sure you're complying with specified maintenance requirements and intervals. Similarly, mortgage lenders and local, state and federal regulatory agencies may have compliance issues to which you must attend.

Setting upkeep priorities can be difficult, especially when economic and meteorological uncertainty seems overwhelming. But, as Weber explains, "maintaining the integrity of the real estate" and making safety paramount will help you plan the best maintenance for your facility in 2011. ❖



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