Cross-campus switch abandoned

By Richard Salz

Dean of the Graduate School Kenneth Wadleigh announced to the General Assembly (GA) last night that the plan to switch east campus residents with those of Ashdown has been withdrawn.

"In effect, we're killing something that's never even been born," noted Associate Dean for Student Affairs Robert Sherwood. Wadleigh also emphasized the plan had not even reached the form of a firm proposal, calling it "pre-proposal."

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By Steven Solnick

Last night's announcement "burying" the "pre-proposal" to switch Ashdown and east campus residents was prompted by three complementary but distinct considerations.

All three administration officials present at the General Assembly meeting last night cited their belief that the lifestyles in the east campus dormitories and Ashdown House could not be preserved after the switch. They also cited a need to analyze broader questions first. Yet the impact of a desire to eliminate a considerable amount of the distrust and animosity between students and faculty at the Institute created by the Commons decision, tuition hike, and dormitory switch discussions cannot be denied.

The administration was, by its own admission, caught somewhat unprepared by the sudden uproar surrounding this spring's first public mention of Wadleigh's twenty-year-old proposal to switch graduate and undergraduate students. The new Dean for Student Affairs Shirley McBay was beginning her job with what she described as "even more worries than she would have had anyway," because of the debate over housing policies -- a debate he said he felt partially "responsible" for. Students would be leaving for home within the next week and would have the entire summer to mull over their objections to both the plan and the administration's attitudes toward their "lifestyle."

Finally, although the three principals deny this was a factor, claiming they were acting as individuals within the administration and not as "the administration," the Gray administration will be taking over in July and his life will certainly be much easier with this issue behind him.

Dean Sherwood said that any decision made by MIT must be based on the factor involved and not the "decibel level" of student objection. In this case, it seems that there was a considerable disagreement among Wadleigh, McBay and Sherwood over the precise reasons for aborting consideration of the dorm switch.

One camp at the GA meeting, led by McBay, cited a need to consider other long-range housing issues from a more removed perspective before being able to effectively pass judgment on so charged an issue as the dorm switch. In other words, the redefining of the concept was premature.

Another camp, led by Sherwood, felt that the benefits of the proposal at this juncture would not justify destroying the "essences and lifestyles" of the three dorms involved.

All three admitted to Wadleigh's contention, however, that the desire to re-establish an atmosphere of mutual trust and an effective working relationship with the student body was a consideration in the decision not to pursue additional consideration of the plan. Their hostile and skeptical reception by the GA showed some of the difficulties they will have in doing this.

The dorm switch episode may well be the most striking example in recent memory of the humanness of this Institute's new administration. A proposal which it now seems was truly under more casual consideration suddenly became a conspiracy, above the cries of both Sherwood and Wadleigh to the contrary. McBay entered the picture in mid-stream at a decided disadvantage because of her lack of knowledge of MIT and her desire to establish good will with the students. The three were faced with the need to reduce the growing campus-wide tension produced by the suggestion as swiftly as possible. They needed to preserve the integrity of the Institute policy process, however, by deciding the "pre-proposal" on the basis of its merits, not merely on the volume of student protest.

Their final strategy was to opt for a direct "burial" of the plan and an attempt to frankly explain the volatile circumstances before the GA. The rest is a matter of trust.