False alarms plague new dorm

By Stuart Gitlow

Yesterday morning at 4:30, fire alarms sounded throughout 500 Memorial Drive, forcing all residents of the building outside in 5 minutes.

"I knew it was an alarm," said George Hasker, House Manager, "but I had a bad feeling." Hasker said that the alarm included smoke detector malfunctions, alarm testing, and one phone line failure which caused fire trucks to arrive when there had been no alarm.

H. Eugene Brammer, Director of Housing and Food Services, reported that yesterday's alarm was due to a malfunction of a smoke detector in one of the stairwells. "During the shakedown of new buildings," he added, "smoke detectors take a little while to be debugged. These false alarms happen in nearly all new buildings."

"Only one false alarm that I know of was caused by a student pulling the handle of a fire alarm box," said John Fresina, Director of the Safety Office.

A myth exists on campus that the Institute is charged by the Fire Department for each false alarm. According to Fresina, "At the present time, there is no direct charge for response by the Cambridge Fire Department. Because of Proposition 2A, Cambridge has a bill pending, which, if it passes, would require the property owner to pay for false alarms. There would, of course, be no charge for real fires or for a legitimate alarm system malfunction. This charge would consist of the cost of running the Fire Department divided by the number of false alarms."

Fresina continued, "MIT does, however, indirectly pay for these alarms. I believe MIT is the second largest taxpayer in Cambridge. Part of these taxes go toward the operation of the Fire Department." Fresina stressed that simply because MIT doesn't pay for each false alarm, students should not pull the alarm handle for an effect. There are uncountable deeks each year due to false alarms, either because of real fires occurring at the same time or accidents involving Department vehicles.

MIT does have to pay one or two electricians four hours overtime to reset the alarm system after it is triggered. This fee alone can run as high as $120.

According to Fresina, some universities have a neat key with housemasters of the dormitories. "At the University of Maine, there are 10 or 11 false alarms per week and the housemaster simply resets the system," Fresina said. Unfortunately, it is difficult to keep an alarm system properly maintained when it is used this way. MIT decided not to leave keys to the alarm boxes with anyone inside the dormitory system, on the assumption that it would be too easy for students to obtain copies of such keys.

500 Memorial Drive will hold fire drills within the next few weeks. At that time, the Institute will request that students who can not hear the alarms in their rooms report this to the house manager. Apparently, in yesterday's alarm, there were a number of people who reported upon hearing of the alarm that they had slept through it. Brammer said that tests will be run on all the alarms. "We'll go through all the rooms to see if there is any spot where they can't be heard," said Brammer.

Fresina mentioned that the new dormitory is fully set up with sprinklers and has fire hoses situated throughout the area. Dry powder extinguishers may soon replace water extinguishers in these dormitories, which have them. Last year, a watchman slipped on ice which was formed when a water fire extinguisher was drained outside in sub-freezing weather.

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