Physical Plant has tough job

Feature

By Susan Seung-Eun Lee

Although MIT gets more complaints, more mail, and perhaps less recognition for its work than any other office on campus, given the crucial role Physical Plant plays in keeping MIT running, it gets far less credit than it deserves.

Physical Plant is a service organization responsible for the entire operation, maintenance, and construction of all the facilities on campus, according to Physical Plant Director Paul F. Barrett. Physical Plant's duties are often very thankless. It receives about 40,000 complaints a year. Once a professor threatened to throw a brick out the window if his air conditioner was not repaired in half an hour, Barrett related.

There are "very few complimentary calls," Barrett said. People call me because "they're terribly unhappy." "But you have to respond to those problems," he explained. The problems range from a leak to not being able to find the custodian.

Barrett became the director of Physical Plant in 1980 but he has been working for the office since 1962. He likes working for Physical Plant because he meets "a lot of interesting people." They range from Nobel Laureates to students, he said.

Physical Plant is a surprisingly large operation: its gross budget is $42 million per year with a net budget of $36 million, according to Barrett. Physical Plant sells certain services, such as heat and energy, to the community, Barrett added.

Although Physical Plant is bigger now than it was in its birth, it is still smaller than it used to be 4 or 5 years ago. At that time, the office suffered a budget setback.