

# Burst pipes cripple BCC

By SHOMIAL AHMAD

Bronx Community College HEO Delwar Sayeed could have been skating on thin ice – literally – in his office in Colston Hall. The day after the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, he discovered ice droplets in his office. In the meeting room next door, icicles hung from the ceiling and patches of ice dotted the radiator and computer tower. Sayeed soon found out that he was not alone.

A series of leaks in the late-night hours throughout the eight-floor building caused significant damage: upending tiles, damaging more than 60 ventilators and leading to a complete electrical, heat, Internet and phone outage. BCC administration immediately shut down Colston Hall. More than 500 classes had to be relocated from the building, and the six academic departments housed in the building were displaced.

Thus Colston Hall became another urgent and significant repair project resulting from the decades-long budget austerity at CUNY, where faculty, staff and students teach and learn in decaying buildings across the city. CUNY cites nearly \$178 million needed for critical repairs at BCC alone in its five-year capital plan request, which was drafted before the Colston disaster, and is waiting to be approved by the state and city.

The repairs include replacing antiquated fire alarms in 18 buildings, replacing the deteriorated roofs of 15 buildings, and replacing decayed windows with ineffective energy coatings (like those in Colston Hall) that make the windows practically opaque. CUNY's sticker price for upgrading and repairing existing buildings across the university is \$4.7 billion.

## MAINTENANCE DUE

"We have a beautiful campus that has been neglected for decades, and now all the deferred maintenance is coming due," PSC BCC Chapter Chair Sharon Utakis told *Clarion*. "This disaster [at Colston Hall] makes BCC the austerity poster child."

An outside engineering group, Genesys Engineering, prepared a status report on the needed repairs in Colston Hall. In it, they cite the initial cause for the leaks as "a power dip and voltage drop" that shut off pumps circulating water through the heating system and causing water in the coils of some heating units to freeze and burst. Remaining water in the units then flooded the building.

The report also noted that fan coil units installed in a 1984 building renovation were well beyond their 20-year life expectancy. Each unit also has dampers that prevent outside air infiltration, but over time, the report noted, the "dampers can fail or become out of adjustment."

## Decades of economic neglect led to chaos



Makeshift dividers separate this large meeting space, which made room for some of the 500 classes that were displaced because of the flooding of Colston Hall.

"This never should have happened in the first place. It wasn't an accident," said Alex Wolf, an associate professor in biology and a member of the PSC chapter executive committee at BCC. "They're letting things go until they blow up."

## 'ROUND THE CLOCK

A college spokesperson said that as a preventative measure for future issues, they have engineers and public safety staff – and additional personnel during extreme weather conditions – working around the clock to monitor and quickly respond to any emergency situations.

In the days and weeks following the leaks, classes and offices moved to wherever there was space. Students in a small history class sat in a 300-seat auditorium with the sound of a loud fan. A lower-level assembly hall was partitioned with makeshift dividers so classes could take place concurrently. Stephen Duncan, an assistant professor of history, had one of his classes moved to a computer lab, where students sat in vertical rows in front of computers, and had to rotate their chairs so they could face him.

"It was extremely disruptive for the [start of the semester]," Duncan said. Duncan thinks he unconsciously talks more and struggles to figure out ways to draw out the shy students because of the awkward seating arrangement in the new space. "Our students are very flexible and easygoing, [but] it's still a disruption in the fragile relationship between student and educator."

For Sayeed, an academic technology specialist and Blackboard administrator, his office is where he does his work. After Colston's closing, he moved offices five times before settling in a small room shared with four other colleagues.

The situation that Sayeed faced in January was avoidable. He had

alerted administration more than a year ago about a draft in his office.

"There is an opening in the wall under the window...which causes the air from outside to rush in," he wrote in an email to BCC administration dated October 17, 2017. "My hands and feet are getting very cold as I am typing this email."

Since that email, the problem persisted.

On February 14, BCC President Thomas Isekenegbe held a campus-wide town hall meeting. Isekenegbe acknowledged that the situation was not ideal and recognized faculty and staff's frustration and anger. He asked everyone to work through the crisis.

"We all need to come together as a community to solve the problem," Isekenegbe told faculty and staff who came to the town hall. "Let's try to frame it in a conversation that is *not* administration versus faculty. Because at the end of the day, folks, it's Bronx Community College."

At the town hall meeting and in campus-wide emails, BCC administration repeatedly laid the blame for the catastrophe on outside forces.

It was "a challenge resulting from the weather," one email said. "There was a power-surge failure in the building," President Isekenegbe said during the town hall. "A brand-new system would have broken too," said Kay Ellis, the vice president of administration and finance, during the town hall.

The administration failed to mention that proper dampers would have prevented cold air from coming in and freezing the water in the coils. The cost of repairs to Colston will come out of CUNY's capital budget – and not through the college's operating budget – because CUNY declared the incident an emergency, President Isekenegbe said. But later the college said that CUNY Central

provided emergency funding, and the outstanding costs would be the responsibility of BCC.

At the February 14 town hall, the president reported that light, heat and the communications network, including the phone and computer system, were restored, and the damaged coils in the heating units had been fixed. But the building was still closed. Ten rooms were sealed off for asbestos abatement, and nearly 50 rooms either needed

some retiling and/or new flooring. By March 5, most classes were back at Colston, but much of the second and third floor was closed off due to asbestos abatement. Faculty from the history and the social sciences departments have expressed concern about returning to their offices on the third floor in Colston until PSC external evaluators sign off on its health and safety. There are no specifics on how to dispose of things properly, especially water-damaged items, faculty said, and the details of the college's cleanup process have not been explained.

During the town hall meeting, BCC administration confidently asserted there was "no mold," but agreed when Utakis pressed the chapter's demand to bring in a nationally recognized mold consultant that the PSC would pay for to evaluate the damaged areas in the building.

Two weeks later, union representatives along with administrators and the outside inspector, Microecologies, conducted a limited walk-through and were able to inspect only eight of the more than two dozen rooms where ruptures in ventilation coils occurred.

## PSC PRESSURE

In half of the rooms observed, they discovered "minor levels of

visible mold growth" or "discoloration" that could suggest mold. Upon receiving the findings, the administration immediately "cleaned and sanitized" the areas, and inspected other areas, but chose not to follow the evaluator's recommendation of replacing the drywall in the inspected rooms and the rooms below them.

"My conclusion is that [the college let us conduct] the walk-through only for show," Utakis wrote in an email to her chapter. "Indoor air quality regulations and regulations concerning mold are not very strict. CUNY seems to be doing only the minimum necessary to stay in compliance with these regulations."

## OUTDATED BUILDINGS

The PSC plans to press forward to ensure that the safety of BCC faculty, staff and students is not compromised, and that proactive, rather than reactive, measures are taken to repair the building.

On March 14, the union conducted another walk-through with the administration, evaluating rooms that were marked off for asbestos abatement and rooms with significant water damage. In some of the rooms severely impacted by the flood, the college agreed to inspect for mold in drywall by removing it and also examining the area behind and on the back of it.

Jean Grassman, co-chair of PSC Health and Safety Watchdogs, attended both walk-throughs. Mold could be hiding behind soaked drywall, impossible to see with painted drywall, or developing in porous materials that remained wet after the flood, explained Grassman.

"We'd like to see the drywall replaced as recommended. Since that is not being considered, it's essential to conduct monitoring for airborne mold," Grassman told *Clarion*. "If that isn't done, we're flying blind in terms of mold hazard."

Utakis said that Howard Apsan, university director of environmental health, safety and risk management, said they would not test the air because the state does not recommend it.

In the past 10 years, CUNY has spent \$140 million in capital funding to upgrade BCC's infrastructure, according to the BCC president. Because there are outdated systems campus-wide, he said that infrastructure upgrades are prioritized: first electrical systems and then the heating and cooling systems. (These projects are part of CUNY's capital budget request.)

Meanwhile, faculty, staff and students work and learn in outdated buildings and adapt as best they can. The PSC continues to demand adequate operating and capital budget funding for CUNY so that faculty, staff and students do not work and learn in conditions that are disasters waiting to happen.

"It's only a matter of time in another building," Wolf told BCC President Isekenegbe in the town hall meeting. "You said next time we'll be better prepared. I hope the attitude is that there won't be a next time."

Dave Sanders