

Chief Davis urges review of space needs

By Don Eriksson
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PEPPERELL — In Townsend, Groton, Ayer, and Shirley, police officers work out of modern buildings built specifically for the purpose.

In Pepperell, police officers work from a drafty old school building that still hasn't been brought up to a level of completeness that was planned when the department moved in.

Police aren't complaining, but as Chief Alan Davis points out, residents should begin to evaluate whether an update to a building not suited to police is more cost efficient than building a better one to house a growing department in a town that has a larger population than its neighbors.

A documented need for an update to the Public Safety Complex currently located in the Clara M. Shattuck School has been put on hold for several years.

Now that school space is adequate and work has begun on a water treatment plant upgrade, "people could start thinking about whether a \$4.5 million update to an unsuitable building is better than building, say, a \$6 million complex somewhere else," Davis said during a recent tour of the former school.

In 1970, the Police Department was moved from the basement of Town Hall to the Tarbell Street School. In 1977, it and the police/fire communications center were moved into the vacant Shattuck School.

A 10-year, \$1.4 million bond was raised for phase-one renovations to the first floor and cellblock in the basement. That bond has been paid off for six years, but phase-two completion "was supposed to happen but hasn't yet," Davis said.

Based on the Finance Committee's recommendation, town meeting voters approved spending \$25,000 in 1999 to hire a consultant to design phase-two renovations to the former school building.

Two years later, that figure came in at \$4.5 million. Davis wrote a letter to Town Administrator Robert Hanson expressing his "astonishment" at the figure.

"I feel the \$4.5 estimate is

difficult for me to support," he wrote. "It raises many questions. Does the town wish to spend this type of money on a 100-year-old building given the limitations of the overall site?" he asked.

"If, however, we are prepared to remain in this building for an indefinite period of time, how long do we wait to renovate and what will the cost be then?" he asked. "Do we want to review other capital requests from the fire and ambulance departments and initiate the feasibility of meeting future needs in a new combined facility?"

A walk through the solid old brick school building reveals some facts of life the general public doesn't see:

Although first-floor spaces have been rearranged for maximum use, most are at capacity. The detective's office is the size of a cloak closet. The ready room is full. The locker room is maxed out.

The fire/police Communications Center and fire inspector's office haven't been moved to the second floor as planned. The lobby area contains soft drink and snack machines that should be out of sight. Reinforced glass windows through which the public must speak via ineffective intercoms are 15 or 20 paces away from staff members located out of sight.

Storm windows applied inside the large school windows do not prevent winter wind from blowing through. Walls are also drafty and the heat/HVAC bills are high. Most rooms still have slate blackboards.

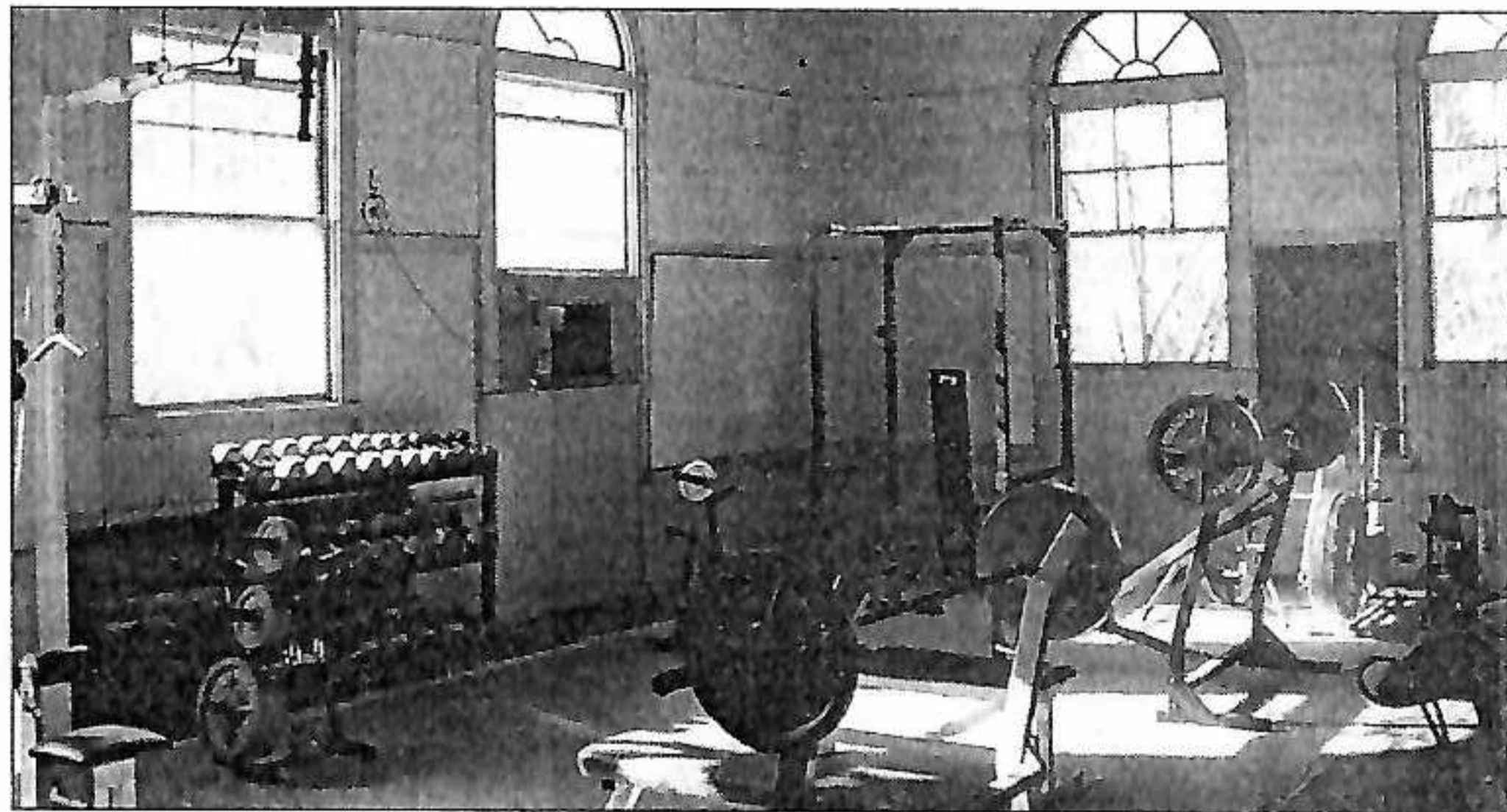
A section of the unfinished second floor used for training can only be used during warm weather months because antique Modine heaters hanging from the ceiling make so much noise voices are barely heard. A huge amount of space that encloses wide school stairways is wasted area.

A second floor workout room is heated by the Modine units as well, but cooled by portable air conditioners stuck into plywood that partially covers windows. Open insulation has been stuffed into holes in the wall where steam radiators once stood.

Windows are not airtight.

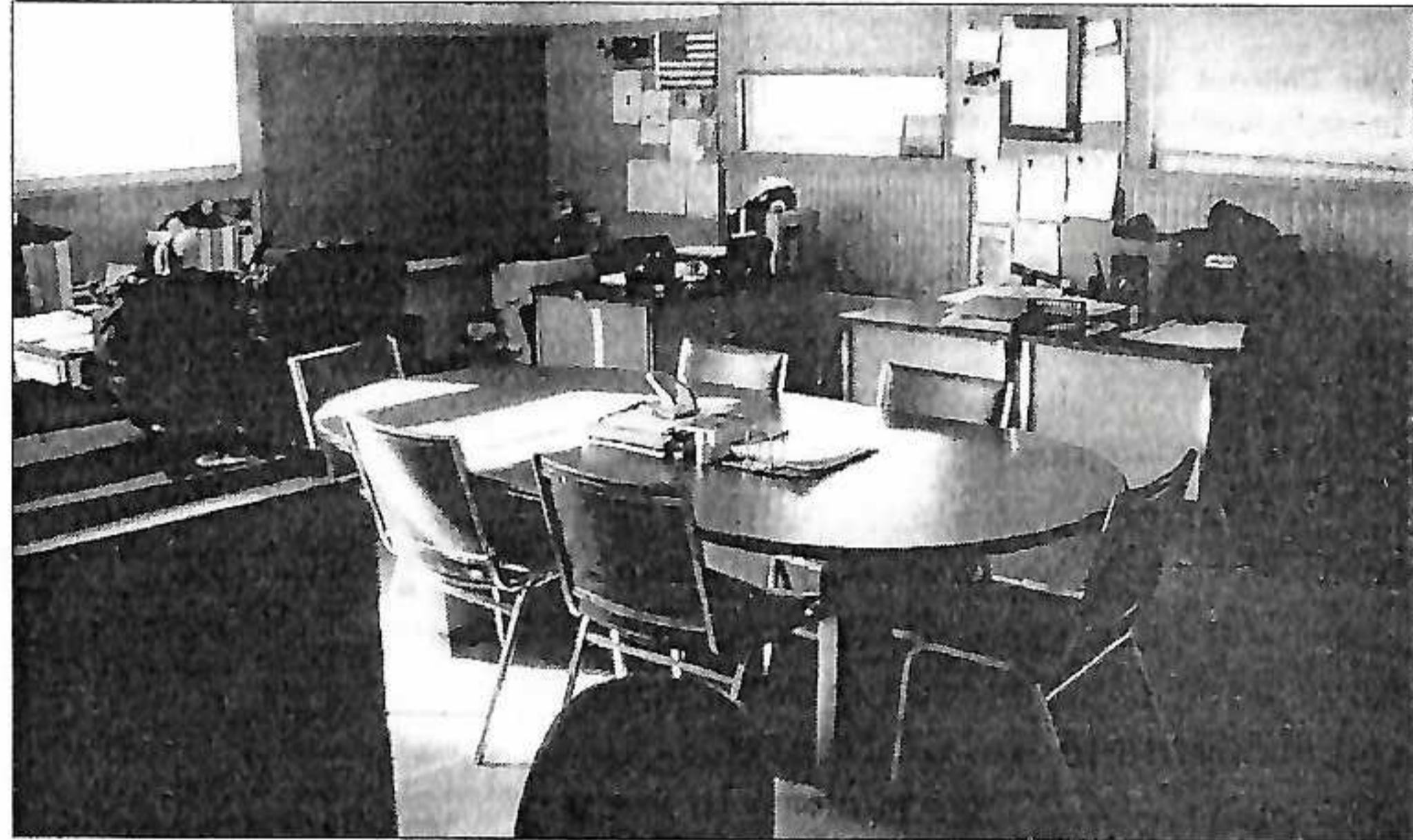
'We have the space square-footage-wise, but is it worth renovating? If there is to be growth in the department, this is not adequate.'

-Police Chief Alan Davis



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This space used as a workout room has inefficient heating and air-conditioning. It is supposed to house other offices, according to renovations that never took place.



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The Police Department staff room is at capacity.

Paint peels from 10-foot ceilings and no carpeting or flooring has been replaced.

The huge third floor (attic) is unusable for anything but storage at present. Designed-in elevators were never installed. Prisoners and public alike must traverse creaky wooden stairways. The building is nowhere near handicapped accessible.

Additionally, the footprint, or the proportionate use of the land area by the building, is

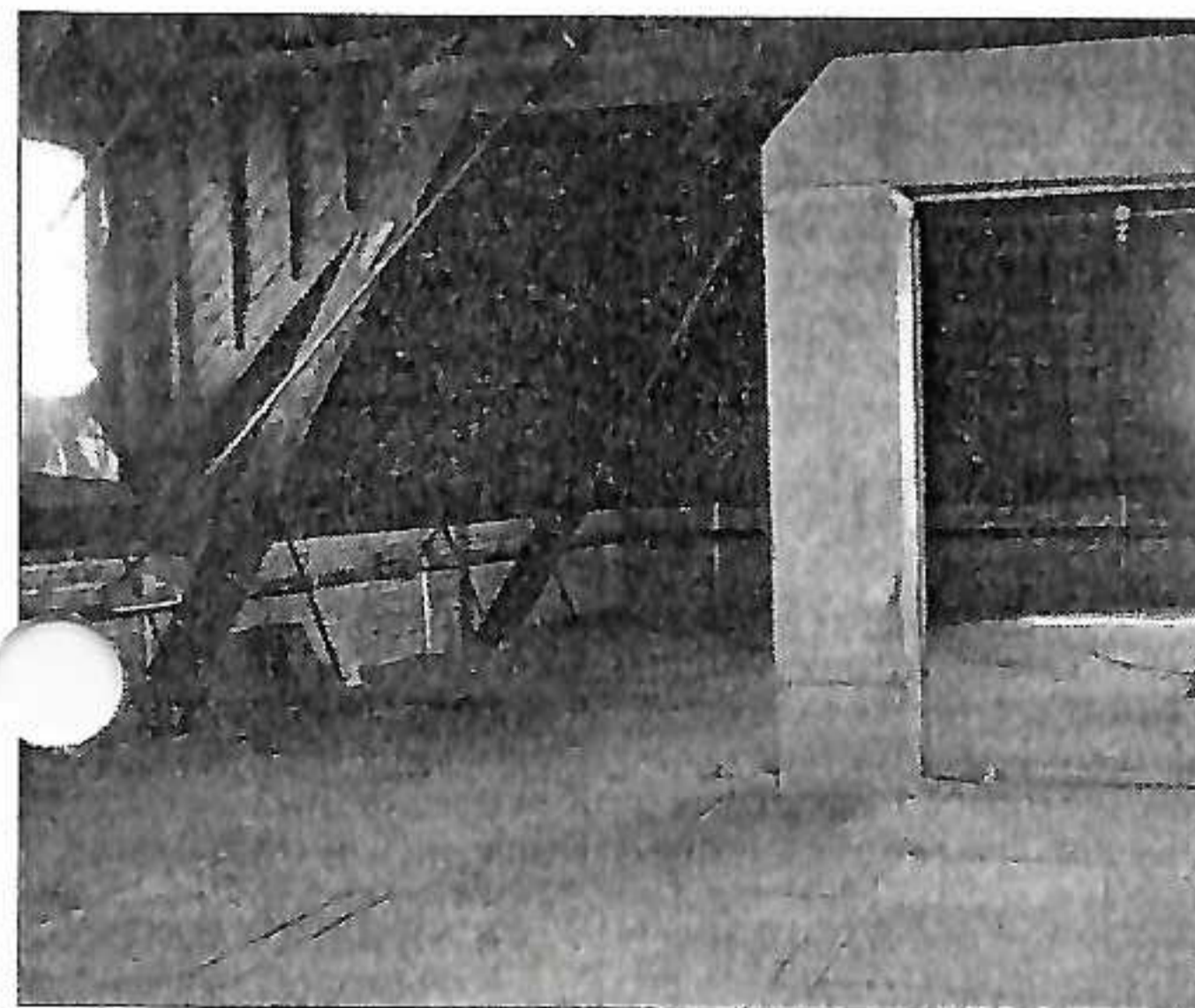
cramped.

A soccer field to the rear restricts the ability to house more than two or three confiscated vehicles because the property line and fence are very close to the building. The usable area property area is further reduced by the requirements to keep the easement for access to the soccer field open.

Parking is limited with only 10 spaces for the public. New garages underneath one end

of the building work well for transporting prisoners to the interior cell blocks, but the blocks themselves do not have the required in-cell cameras to monitor them. The station has two double-bunk cells and two single-bunk cells.

"I think we'll be in here for 20 years," Davis said. "We have the space square footage wise, but is it worth renovating? If there is to be growth in the department, this is not adequate."



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The third floor attic of the Shattuck School was supposed to become usable by the Police Department, according to phase 2 plans.

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