

Wednesday open house to focus on Belmont town building needs

Written by Tom Caldwell

By THOMAS P. CALDWELL, LACONIA DAILY SUN

BELMONT — Residents will have an opportunity to rank the needs and issues of 12 public buildings following an open house on Wednesday at Belmont High School.

The Belmont Facility Strategy Committee has scheduled the event to run from 4 to 7:30 p.m., with the committee holding a question-and-answer period at 6. The purpose of the open house is to find out what residents consider to be the biggest and most pressing issues with town facilities, including the Town Hall, library, police department, Belmont Mill and the bank building.

“We want to move toward a coherent strategy,” said Donna Hepp, who organized the committee after voters had rejected previous plans for the old mill and Town Hall.

Hepp said residents may have different priorities from what the town has considered in the past, so each person attending the open house will be asked to fill out a comment sheet. There will be room to offer comments and suggestions that may identify other priorities.

Selectmen approved Hepp’s request to form the committee after voters at this year’s Town Meeting said the mill should be used for town offices or community services, or should be sold, but did not include any funding. Hepp proposed looking at all town-owned buildings, rather than focusing on one or two, with an eye toward identifying a range of options that might be presented to voters at next year’s deliberative session.

Those options might be remodeling, shifting functions to other spaces, or continuing to operate as they currently do.

“If we stay the same, there’s still the cost of maintaining 12 buildings,” Hepp said. “The sky isn’t falling on anyone right now, but we may not have the best functional environment.”

The open house will have information tables that describe each building and some of the issues the committee has identified. The police department and the Town Hall seem to have the biggest needs, Hepp said, but people may want to address issues with other buildings first.

Some of the problems the committee will be discussing are the lack of space for an expanded dispatch operation at the police department, as well as the lack of storage for both records and long-term evidence. The police department is also putting rooms into multiple purposes rather than having dedicated space for interviews and training.

The library does not meet all of the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and it has shelf space for half of the books recommended for a community of Belmont’s size.

Like the police department, the Town Hall needs additional storage space, and is short on office space, with some offices located in the basement. The second story cannot be used because of a compromised roof.

The Belmont Mill currently has restrictions on use because of grant funding it has received, but those restrictions expire in 2019, allowing the town to consider additional functions there.

The fire station has sufficient space right now, but it soon may need more room to accommodate additional firefighters.

“Everyone’s been doing a great job of making do,” Hepp said, “but we want to highlight the issues, so we can zero in on what’s most important to Belmont residents. We’re working toward having options based on citizen feedback, and explore the option before investing money in anything.

“We feel we’re working for both the selectmen and town citizens, so we want to start by focusing on all town buildings, and once we know what’s most important, we can share a range of options.”

Other members of the Belmont Facility Strategy Committee are Tom Garfield, Carmen Lorenz and Pret Tuthill.