



Community hears update on Building Facility Strategy Committee's work

BY DONNA RHODES

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BELMONT — Belmont's Building Facility Strategy Committee held an open house at Belmont High School last Wednesday evening where they first welcomed citizens with snacks and displays of the town's currently owned public properties, then held a brief introductory discussion on their work since the committee was approved at the 2017 Deliberative Session.

Current volunteers on the committee are Tom Garfield, Donna Hepp, Carmen Lorentz and Pret Tuthill.

Hepp addressed the gathering of about two dozen people by saying the purpose of the committee was to take a "big picture look" at the



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Belmont resident Donna Hepp led an introductory public discussion on the current findings of the Building Facility Strategy Committee last week, then encouraged residents to join them in the ongoing process of evaluating the importance and future potential of town-owned buildings.

12 buildings currently owned by the town so "we don't miss opportu-

nities down the road."

By opportunities, she said that meant every-

thing from relocation of offices, possible renovations, potential sales and anything else that might be presented to the Board of Selectmen and, ultimately, the voters.

"We have no agenda. We're here to develop a range of options that are practical and meet the future needs of the community," she said.

Any proposals would then be brought up at the annual deliberative session for public opinion and vote.

Since its inception this past spring, the committee has toured all of the properties, which include the town hall, police and fire departments, the Belknap Mill and the former bank building, which was purchased by the town several years ago and

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left vacant ever since that time as discussions on its future have been mulled over.

The committee has also met with staff members to learn their needs and looked into problems and potentials at each site.

"There's really a wide range of options out there," Hepp said.

After completing the tours and discussions, the group put together a Belmont Town Facility Comment Sheet based on nine of the structures listed. They are asking for public input by having residents rank the facilities in importance based on a summary of their findings.

Two of those need the town to determine a long-term usage plan. One is the bank building,

which the committee found to be structurally in good condition with many options available, but limited space for storage.

The second property is the Belmont Mill, currently home to the Senior Center and Recreation Department along with a doctor's office, which is looking to relocate. They found that the fourth floor of the building is not usable until repairs are made to bring it up to safety codes. The south wall of the exterior was also found to be in need of some repairs to the brick work and the electrical and HVAC systems will also need to be updated. Otherwise, they found the mill to be in structurally "good condition." The clock is ticking on its grant restrictions that will end in 2019 however and a long-term plan for the

building will need to be established soon.

The library building is part of the National Historic Register and while the committee found it to be in average condition by the committee's judgment, they learned it is already being assessed on how to meet the ever-increasing needs of the community.

The police department also has increasing demands and the committee found that building to be inadequate for a number of reasons. The department has a growing need for more locker space for officers, office space for dispatch and administration, separate training and interview rooms, and several storage needs. There is also a need for improvements to their Intake Area that would increase the safety of all

who work or visit the building.

Town Hall ranked low in the committee findings. The building was found to be in fair to poor condition structurally. Meetings once held in the building have been moved to Corner Meeting House due to the conditions and in order to utilize the second floor again, major roof repairs will be necessary. There is also inadequate office space, room for files and office equipment, long-term storage and an issue with parking along Main Street/

Corner Meeting House itself was also found to be in fair condition.

Selectman Ruth Mooney spoke up to clarify that there is no money involved with the committee's finding at this time and no costs

on any repairs or renovations have been established.

"We first need to come up with alternatives, then decide if it's worth investing money to expand or renovate a building," she said.

And that, Hepp said, is where the residents can play an important role in letting the committee and selectmen know where priorities should fall.

"I think all 12 buildings are community assets. It's about being deliberative in what we're investing in," she said.

Copies of the comment sheet, a survey-type form where residents can rank their priorities on nine of the town facilities, are now available at the town hall and everyone is encouraged to weigh in with their thoughts, comments and sugges-

tions as well.

The town's Web site also has a link devoted to buildings and facilities where more information can be found.

In addition, the committee is inviting others to join them in their ongoing efforts to consider the future of the town's facilities. For questions and information on how to become involved, Hepp can be reached at dhepp3@gmail.com, Garfield at juniperknollfarm@gmail.com, Tuthill at pret.keymont@gmail.com and Lorentz at clorentz@laclt.org.

"We're recruiting. We would love to have more folks in our resource group as we go through this process," said Hepp. "We don't want to work on a project that's just a plan that sits on a shelf. We want to figure out how it's all going to happen."