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LRCC CULINARY PROGRAM VACATES BELMONT MILL

Published Date

BELMONT – The Lakes Region Community College Culinary Arts Program and the Food For Thought Cafe will not continue operations at the historic Belmont Mill.

The reason, said Vice President of Academic Affairs Thomas Goulette, is that there are structural problems with the fourth floor of the mill. He said he doesn't know all of the details but said it has to do with the load capacity of the floor.

"We are scrambling to find another location," Goulette said, adding classes begin January 22 and the program has about 70 students.

The structural problems with the fourth floor of the Belmont Mill were brought to the attention of the Belmont Board of Selectmen in early December. Culinary Arts teacher Patrick Hall and Goulette initially approached the board about replacing the fourth-floor carpet.

During that discussion, Hall mentioned there were some "dips" or "soft spots" in the dining area in addition to the frayed carpet. Not knowing the extent of the needed repairs, Goulette told selectmen LRCC had just signed a two-year agreement with the town and intended to remain in the mill.

Selectmen asked Steve Paquin, the town's code enforcement officer, to do a preliminary inspection of the fourth floor. He returned to the board two weeks later with the news that portions of the floor had rotted, apparently from water damage suffered in the 1992 fire that nearly destroyed the building.

Given permission to hire an engineer to give the town a better estimate on the repairs, Town Administrator Jeanne Beaudin said yesterday the town has temporarily stopped the engineering work and "circumstances beyond (the town's) control warrant (the culinary program) vacate the fourth floor."

Goulette confirmed yesterday the school was told to vacate the fourth floor.

The Mill was built in the early 1800s and was nearly destroyed in a blaze two decades ago. A 1995 restoration effort prevented the main portion of it from being destroyed and in 2011, the Belmont Mill was given a Preservation Award by the New England Chapter of the Victorian Society in America - one of four such awards ever given in New Hampshire.

Beaudin said there is a public hearing Monday night for residents to discuss with selectmen the possible addition of a warrant article on March's town ballot that would allow the town to bond up to \$500,000 for Belmont Mill repairs.

She said the Belmont Budget Committee would be discussing the proposed warrant article among other budget items on January 8 in a meeting at the Corner Meeting House that begins at 6:30 p.m.

Goulette said yesterday that despite the great relationship LRCC has had with the town of Belmont, it is not likely the Culinary Arts Program will return to the historic mill.

"I can't emphasize enough what a good relationship we've had with the town of Belmont," said Goulette, who is himself a Belmont resident.

He said the program is growing rapidly and continually struggles with space. He also said the new addition on the main campus of LRCC will not accommodate the culinary arts program.

Addressing the immediate concern of finding a place to operate the culinary arts program before January 22, Goulette said LRCC "has reached out to our public and private partners to come up with a solution."

Along with a request in the state University System's Capital Budget for space for the program, Goulette said he has also filed an inquiry with to the N.H. Department of Administrative Services to see if there is existing government-owned space for the program.

"We're kind of in a mess right now, but we're going to get out of it," Goulette said.

"We'll push hard for a solution," he said, adding that taking care of the students is the school's primary goal. "We'll be somewhere, but I'm not sure where that will be."

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