

Historians want Belmont Mill saved again



Wallace Rhodes of the Belmont Heritage Commission stands in front of the historic Belmont Mill. COURTESY LINDA FRAWLEY

Town historians, who helped save the historic Belmont Mill from demolition once before, would very much like to see town officials convert the mill into town office space, as town officials are considering.

By DAN SEUFERT

Union Leader Correspondent

BELMONT — Town historians, who helped save the Belmont Mill from demolition once before, would very much like to see town officials convert the mill into town office space, as town officials are considering.

The historic mill currently houses community service partners, including a doctor's office, a senior center, and a day care center. But as town officials search for a new space for town offices, they are looking at the possibility of using the mill to relocate the town offices, which are

in a downtown building that has no more space for them.

Converting the mill to town office space is just one of several options town officials are considering. But the Belmont Heritage Commission's Wallace Rhodes, who is credited with leading the mill preservation efforts in the 1990s, hopes it is the one they choose.

"I recall back in the '90s, my original thought was, 'it would make a nice place for the town offices,'" Rhodes said. "I think it would be a good place for that use."

The mill was saved in the '90s with the help of a government grant, which expires in five years. Rhodes isn't sure what will happen to the mill after that time if the town does not act.

"Most of the people who helped save the mill aren't around anymore," he said.

The commission's Linda Frawley agreed with Rhodes that the mill must be maintained beyond the next five years

"The heritage commission is keenly interested in the mill's future and other significant village buildings that tell the Belmont community story," Frawley said.

Town Administrator Jeanne Beaudin told selectmen last week that engineers have estimated it will take \$1.4 million to repair the mill building. Many repairs are needed on the fourth floor, she said, and the building needs heating, air conditioning and other repairs.

The total cost of converting the old building into a town office building is \$2.7 million, Beaudin said.

The mill has been recognized statewide for its historic value. In 2011, it was listed among 25 of New Hampshire's greatest preservation achievements of the previous 25 years by the N.H. Preservation Alliance.

Built in 1833 and converted to hosiery production in 1865, the mill was the "economic heart of Belmont village," according to the heritage commission, until it closed in 1970.

Years of neglect were followed by a five-alarm fire in August 1992. It appeared to be the final chapter, until the Belmont Historical Society, led by Rhodes, began its preservation effort, which managed to halt the building's demolition by the town with an injunction in 1995.

In early 1996, Plan N.H. and the Office of State Planning held a first-in-the-state charrette, resulting in options for mill re-use. The efforts led to two Community Development Block Grants totaling \$1 million supported by Belknap County and aided by the Belknap County Economic Development Council, for the

town to rehab the building. Local voters approved a \$215,000 bond issue as its match. In 1998, the building was renamed the “Belmont Mill Community Center.”

dseufert@newstote.com

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