
Masonry expert gets first look at Belmont Mill

By TIM CAMERATO | Oct 31, 2014

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BELMONT — A masonry specialist hired to evaluate the Belmont Mill has completed an initial inspection, and although nothing alarming was found, a second, closer look is being planned.

The Board of Selectmen are currently in conversations with construction managers Bonnette, Page & Stone and PortOne Architects to move town offices from their current home in Town Hall to the mill.

Earlier this month, former selectmen Mark Mooney and Donna Cilley expressed their concerns that the building might not be structurally secure. That conversation with the selectmen was followed by an Oct. 10 visit from structural engineer Bob Champagne, with Summit Engineering in Portsmouth, and a promise to bring in a masonry specialist.

Scott Whitaker, president and CEO of Building Envelope Specialists in Portland, Maine, toured the building on Oct. 16.

“It went well. He didn’t see anything there that shook him up,” said BPS Vice President Keith McBey, who accompanied him through the building.

McBey said he told Whitaker about worries that the 1992 fire caused damage to the remaining bricks, but no evidence of that was found. Occupied spaces and current use of the building made it difficult for Whitaker to get a comprehensive story of the brickwork though, meaning a second trip is being planned for next week.

McBey said several areas of the mill need to be closely inspected, like the space that once housed the Lakes Region Community College’s culinary program on the fourth floor. He said Whitaker thought there could be some heat damage near the range hood. A further look will also tell Whitaker whether the bricks are functioning as initially intended.

“He needs to prove it rather than just saying that it’s fine,” McBey said.

Whitaker explained that the walkthrough allowed him to plan for a more detailed assessment. He said his firm does a lot of work with mill buildings along the east coast, although the Belmont Mill is smaller than most of those.

“Generally, depending on the history of the building and what the building has gone through with repair, it (an assessment) will tell how much life a building has left in it,” Whitaker said.

He said, if left untouched, a mill’s condition is affected by weather exposure and quality of construction.

“There’s no uniform design on how these were built,” Whitaker said.

He added that many of the mills built between 1800 and 1840 are now being renovated for use as offices or mix-use space. He said that care has to be taken when going about that process, as modern equipment can be heavier and put different pressures on the building.

McBey said more work is also being done to reduce the costs of the mill's mechanical and electrical work. According to an initial cost estimate provided by BPS, new plumbing, mechanical, and electrical work could cost about \$920,000. He said they've sent information out to subcontractors looking for estimates.

"We've just got our eye on those big numbers," McBey said.

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