
Looking through the bricks

Masonry inspector takes second look at Belmont Mill, report expected next week

By TIM CAMERATO | Nov 15, 2014

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MASONRY EXPERT Scott Whitaker applies a moisture reader to the Belmont Mill's bricks inside the Belmont Early Learning Center on Wednesday.

BELMONT — Looking through a hole in the building's drywall, Scott Whitaker could see sample of the Belmont Mill's brick interior. The masonry expert passed a moisture reader over portions of wall. At points, the device lit up red, in others, it was green. He then moved on to striking the bricks with a steel hammer.



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Whitaker said he listens to the ringtone and action of the hammer as it hits the bricks. If it rebounds, there's solid masonry. If there's a thud, "then we've got hollows in there."

Whitaker, who's the president and CEO of Building Envelope Specialists in Portland, Maine, was visiting the mill's four floors on Wednesday at the behest of the Board of Selectmen, who have been meeting to move town offices into the building from Town Hall. Questions about the building's structural capabilities, and particularly the masonry, have put planning on

hold, though.

On Oct. 16, Whitaker took an initial walkthrough of the mill. While the bricks looked promising, he insisted on coming back for a more detailed inspection.

Holes were cut into the building on Nov. 7 to allow Whitaker to get access to the bricks, something that was not possible during his last trip because three floors are currently occupied and busy during business hours.

Whitaker said the holes were placed so he could get to interior bricks and wooden beam pockets.

"What we're trying to do is an average survey across the building," Whitaker said.

He said he's not only interested in seeing the bricks, but also the construction of the mill. If moisture or leaks cause rot, beams would need to be replaced.

"The most important factor in understanding masonry building is whether the current condition of the walls withstanding loading."

In his stack of tool boxes, Whitaker keeps his steel hammer, camera, moisture reader, and pair of chisels. He said the reader shows red when there's a lot of moisture, yellow when there's a cautionary amount, and green for reasonable amounts.

Whitaker said he took a variety of readings on Wednesday, but that doesn't necessarily mean the bricks are bad.

With his two chisels Whitaker tested the mortar holding the bricks together. With a flat nose chisel he used a hammer to try and push it into the mortar. On spaces where it went in more than an inch, he switched to one with a pointed nose and used his hand to push it in.

Whitaker said, if the mortar is good, it won't allow the chisel to push in.

"As a whole, I think that the investigation went very well," Whitaker said.

He said he hasn't drawn any conclusions yet, but will spend the remainder of the week to pour over his findings and issue a report early next week.

Although he performed "the most basic of tests" on the mill, Whitaker said his 35 years of expiere will help him determine whether the mill is compromised.

Whitaker said also been asked to prepare a presentation for the town, when his report is complete.

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