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Belmont Mill renovation project would cost \$3.6 million

BELMONT MILL RENOVATION PROJECT WOULD COST \$3.6 MILLION



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BELMONT – Selectmen last night were taken aback by a \$3,657,578 estimate for work necessary to convert the Belmont Mill into town offices.

All three selectmen, meeting before a large crowd at the Corner Meeting House, said they were surprised by the price tag of the project but felt it should proceed to the Budget Committee and then to voters on the town warrant.

"This is not just a monetary but a tremendous political issue," said selectman Jon Pike, noting that the decisions made by the board, the Budget Committee and the voters in 2015 will have repercussions for the next 20 years.

The historic Belmont Mill was repaired 17 years ago by the town using a combination of tax dollars, historic renovation money and a grant from a Community Development Block Grant. The amount of the grant is forgiven as long as the building is used for middle-to-low income purposes – such as the day care, the doctors' office, and the senior center currently found in the building.

About two years ago, selectmen learned there were some structural problems with the fourth floor. At the time, the Lakes Region Community College was renting the entire floor for its culinary arts program, which has since relocated to Shaker Village in Canterbury.

"The fourth floor is condemned at this point. It's unusable," said Ruth




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Mooney, chair of the selectboard.

2015?

Since then the town has learned the daycare center has outgrown its space in the basement and is looking to relocate. Mooney said she had heard the doctors' office was also looking for a different space, which would leave the building nearly empty.

Yes

No

I haven't decided yet

The decision faced by the selectmen is to fix it or let it fall down, said Mooney.

SUBMIT

Selectmen decided to get an estimate from Bonnette, Page and Stone to see how much it could cost to fix it and turn it into town offices.

In the course of that process, and at the recommendation of resident Mark Mooney, BP&S hired a masonry expert to examine the exterior of the brick portion of the building to see if it made sense to fix it. After an examination, selectmen learned that the bricks in the area where a fire in 1992 burned the hottest were compromised and should be replaced. The brick work in the other three walls was determined to be sound.

The additional masonry work was estimated to cost \$800,000.

Keith McBey of BP&S said the maximum amount of \$3.6-million is a "turn key" price for everything – including all of the soft costs such as engineering and furniture for a town hall.

Selectmen also mentioned that the town has just over \$500,000 in a building maintenance capital reserve fund and could realize an additional \$500,000 in savings in the proposed 2015 budget by shifting some items around and reducing the proposed road maintenance budget.

Not everyone at the meeting was sold, especially when they heard the road maintenance budget could be reduced by as much as \$300,000.

Former Selectman Donna Cilley said the town agreed to spend about \$800,000 annually on the roads because of a plan developed by the town a number of years ago.

When Selectman Ron Cormier attempted to explain their reasoning, Cilley kept talking, leading the two to exchange some harsh words.

Cilley, who is also the Town Welfare Officer, said that she didn't like the idea that other town budgets could be reduced to fund the mill conversion program.

"To skim from other departments is wrong," she said.

Cilley also said she wanted the entire cost of the project, and not one reduced by a half-million dollars from other departments to be put before the voters so they could decide.

When Selectman Jon Pike noted that because of the recent recession, many road projects came in at lower than expected bids and the town was able to fix more roads than they had planned, Cilley said her point is that she doesn't want to see the town fall behind in road maintenance.

"And we won't," said Pike.

Pike said much of the problems the town is seeing today stem from shoddy construction work done 17 years ago when the mill was originally restored. He noted that the taxpayers have spent at least \$250,000 on items that should have been done during the restoration.

Because all of the companies have since gone out of business, the town, said Pike, was left without any recourse.

Others were concerned with what would happen to the rest of the town buildings – including the former Northway Bank building taxpayers bought at a special town meeting a few years ago.

One woman said she was under the impression that the bank building

was going to be used for town offices but selectmen said it wasn't big enough. Mooney said she would like to see it torn down and used for green space or parking.

Ken Knowlton spoke in support of the mill renovation project.

He said the mill is what makes Belmont the town that it is, noting the village project has made the town much more attractive.

Knowlton acknowledged that the mill has been a "thorn in the side of many residents," but said he always suspected that once the CDBG block grant time limit of 20 years was satisfied, the town would use it for municipal offices.

"This is an investment in our heritage," Knowlton said.

Taking it all in was Budget Committee Chairman Ron Mitchell who told selectmen toward the end of the meeting that it was "going to be a hard sell."

When asked directly by Pike if he would support it, Mitchell said he would but only if the entire amount – minus some money from the building maintenance fund - was bonded. Fortunately, he said, Belmont carries very little debt load as compared to other communities and the bond rates are low right now.

"If the bond fails and no one's in it, we can lock it up," Mitchell said.

Town Administrator Jeanne Beaudin said she and the engineers would be reviewing the project for places where savings could be had and would report the final not-to-exceed price to selectmen for the January 5 meeting.

Because of the schedule for annual town meeting, the Budget Committee has until the second week of January to act on the selectman's recommendation after which there will be a public hearing.

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