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## Selectmen want voter opinion on mill

By TIM CAMERATO | Jan 06, 2015

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**BELMONT** — The Board of Selectmen is hoping an upcoming warrant article or nonbinding referendum will gauge town opinion of the Belmont Mill.

The selectmen took time during their Monday night meeting to discuss the future of the mill project in the wake of a tense meeting last week, where a new \$3,657,578 price tag for renovations was presented.

Following the board's meeting on Dec. 29, Town Administrator Jeanne Beaudin said she was instructed to reinstate money to the Highway Reconstruction Capital Reserve Fund. During that meeting, former selectman Donna Cilley grew angry with the board over its request to move \$600,000 from the fund to pay for the mill project.

Beaudin asked the members on Monday to confirm that moving the money back meets their recommendations.

"It would seem that all is not lost, but the ship is sinking," Selectman Jon Pike said, adding he supports putting the money back.

Beaudin said she originally took \$600,000 out of the proposed 2015 \$750,000 budget and put it into the Municipal Facilities Capital Reserve Fund. Following the meeting, the money was put back, and \$125,000 was placed in the municipal fund to be used on emergencies for other buildings.

Beaudin said she also hasn't heard back from Bonnette, Page & Stone, who had agreed to look into reducing the cost of a possible \$752,152 masonry project and bring back final numbers for the Budget Committee.

"They were told that, at the absolute, they had to have something to me before the 13th of January," Beaudin said.

She said the information sent to budget committee members was presented at the Dec. 29 meeting.

Selectman Ruth Mooney said she's not certain the amount of the renovation really matters. She said what the committee will look at is what the bond will do to the tax rate.

"The amount does matter," Selectman Ron Cormier said.

"I'm going to say my piece and I'm going to shut my mouth because, quite honestly, at this point in time, I don't give a crap where this moves forward at this point in time. (I'm) really becoming very cynical," Cormier said.

He said he's heard circular arguments for the past 11 years about town buildings, and he heard them again at the last meeting.

“That meeting never should have taken place. If anybody knew that that number came in a million dollars higher than it should have, that meeting never should have taken place,” Cormier said. “That figure should have been put out in front of all those people until we had a chance to discuss it.”

Cormier said it doesn't matter what number the town asks for because the renovation project “died a slow death” that night.

“Put the money back in the highway fund because at least it'll get used,” Cormier said. “This building's going nowhere now.”

“You might as well take that off and put the bank building on the seal because that's about where it's going to go,” Cormier said while pointing to the town seal in the Corner Meeting House.

Pike said he agrees the information wasn't presented in the best way, but they've still got to deal with the mill. Beaudin said she spoke with Building Inspector Steven Paquin, and he said the building cannot be left alone because the deteriorating fourth floor provides structural stability.

“At some point, somehow, we've got to get the question out whether it be zero dollars or \$4 million, what is the public opinion?” Pike asked.

He said selectmen know the need for space is there, but they need an opinion of whether to tear the building down or fix it to move forward.

“What to do with this building is a problem whether you tear it down and build a new one or do what they want – save the belfry,” Pike said. “Get two belfries. Make it look like a castle. Put the Gale School belfry on one side then the mill belfry on the other.”

Cormier said the only way to gauge the town is to put the bond for a vote and see what happens. If the vote passes or comes close, the selectmen can continue working to either fix the building or tweak plans.

When asked what happens if the Budget Committee votes against recommending the renovation, Beaudin said the dollar amount couldn't be achieved.

“Without the Budget Committee recommendation the total budget that's approved can't exceed 10 percent of their recommended budget,” Beaudin said. “If by some quirk of fate the building did pass, everything after the building would not.”

Pike suggested that, if the bond is not recommended, a questionnaire should still be on the ballot.

The Budget Committee meets on the Belmont Mill bond tonight at 6:30 p.m. A bond hearing is also planned for Tuesday, Jan. 20, at 7 p.m.

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