

## Belmont Mill renovation in voters' hands

*Residents place warrant article for \$3.3 million project on ballot*

By ED PIERCE | Jan 31, 2015

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BELMONT RESIDENTS debate the merits of placing a warrant article for the Belmont Mill renovation before voters during the deliberative session of Town Meeting on Saturday at Belmont High School.

**BELMONT** — A total of 27 warrant articles were under consideration for placement on the ballot during the Belmont Town Meeting deliberative session on Saturday, but the \$3.3 million proposal to renovate the Belmont Mill and move the town offices there gathered the most attention and led to a spirited debate.

Residents were asked to approve a warrant article authorizing a vote in March for the town to raise \$2,957,250 in municipal bonds and \$400,000 from the Belmont Capital Reserve Fund to repair the 182-year-old structure and make it the new town hall.

The four-story mill was built in 1833 and then converted to hosiery production in 1865.



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It remained a viable business in the center of Belmont until closing permanently in 1970.

A five-alarm fire in 1992 destroyed much of the building, now owned by the Town of Belmont, before a successful effort was launched to save the mill.

Aided by two Community Development Block Grants totaling \$1 million, an anonymous \$25,000 donation and a \$215,000 bond issue approved by voters, the mill building was rededicated in 1998 and currently rents space for a doctor's office, a childcare center and the Belmont Senior Center.

Belmont Budget Committee Chairman Ron Mitchell said that because of the age of the building, it has been plagued by a series of structural problems.

The mill roof was replaced three years ago, but recent inspections revealed serious concerns regarding flooring, heating and ventilation and masonry.

"I think we need to save it," Mitchell said. "It's certainly going to be the centerpiece of Belmont. The bottom line is we need to do it and do it right."

Former Belmont Town Administrator Don McLelland Sr. said the time is right to repair the structure.

The mill has been an expense to taxpayers for a lot of time," McLelland said. "Sooner or later you have to pay to finish the project and have this thing go away for 50 years."

A motion to strike the warrant article entirely failed because of legal reasons before Donna Hepp made a motion to amend the warrant article to only spend \$1 million for floor renovation and masonry repairs with \$600,000 coming from a bond and \$400,000 from the town's capital reserve fund,

Belmont Selectman Ronald Cormier said that the \$3.3 million plan to renovate the mill is the top plan he's seen to fix the mill since he's been involved with town government.

"In 11 years I've been involved with the town, this is the best plan I have seen," Cormier said. "It's the most comprehensive plan we've ever come up with. I can't see spending \$1 or \$1.2 million. It's time to keep that momentum."

Town Administrator Jeanne Beaudin said the final CDBG grant from the 1998 renovation expires in 2019, but she has been working to obtain a buyout of \$200,000 so that if the proposal is approved by voters, work could begin this year.

Hepp's amendment to the mill warrant article failed and residents then turned back to the original warrant article and approved placing it on the ballot for voters to decide its fate at the vote on March 10.

Hepp said her intention is to educate voters about the mill renovation issue.

"The town selectmen and staff did well on getting certified specialists to make a comprehensive survey of the building and determine what's needed to protect it and improve it for adaptive reuse," Hepp said. "Moving town hall to the mill may be the best choice, but until we have a clear basis for comparison of costs and trade-offs between renovating the existing town office, the town-owned bank building and the Belmont Mill, we don't have a basis for a good decision. In addition, as I mentioned, there are public-private options for sharing the costs of renovating the mill."

She said she finds it difficult to support the proposal for the Belmont Town Offices to fill all four floors of the Belmont Mill building at almost three times the space currently used for just 20 full and part-time employees.

"That does not appear to me to be the 'highest and best use' for the Belmont Mill building. Surely, if the decision is made to move town offices to the mill, a better plan can be made to limit the town office and Senior Center between two to three floors and lease remaining space," Hepp said. "In addition, with the limited number of historic buildings on Main Street in Belmont, it is a concern that the existing town office is seen by some as a great place for a parking lot.

"Let's not sell Belmont's heritage short. It is a good basis for attracting new businesses and needed economic development to Belmont," she said. "Many New Hampshire towns recognize this and have benefited by rehabilitating and reuse of historic buildings."

If approved by a 3/5 majority of voters at that time, repairs to the mill would commence later this year and bond repayment would start in 2016.

The first-year estimated cost for taxpayers would be 48 cents per \$1,000 or \$96 per year for a home valued at \$200,000, Mitchell said. In its second year, that cost would drop to 45 cents per \$1,000 or \$90 per year.

An informational meeting about the entire mill project will be held at 6:30 p.m. on Feb. 23 at the Corner Meeting House.

Residents also approved a bevy of other warrant articles to be sent on for voter approval including spending \$300,000 to purchase a used ladder truck for the first department; property tax exemptions for disabled and elderly homeowners; dispensing \$25,547 to nonprofit groups from the John M. Sargent Fund; and adding \$125,000 to the Town Capital Reserve Fund.

Other approved warrant articles were appropriating \$750,000 for highway reconstruction and maintenance; \$536,556 for sewage collection and disposal; and \$233,683 for the town's water distribution and treatment system.

The proposed town operating budget of \$7,257,691 was approved at the meeting.

Should voters turn down that budget in March, the default budget would be \$7,052,519.

Beaudin said the \$205,172 budget increase is a result of previously negotiated labor agreements.

Because a successful petition drive was mounted, Belmont voters also are going to be asked in March if they would like to rescind the official ballot law, commonly referred to as SB2 for the bill which became the law. If passed, the town would revert to the traditional Town Meeting where voting takes place right at the meeting, and would take away voting by the larger public.

A public hearing regarding the SB2 issue will be held at 5:15 p.m. on Feb. 23 at the Corner Meeting House,

Belmont's vote and election of town officials will be from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Tuesday, March 10, at Belmont High School.

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## Comments (0)

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### Staff Profile

I'm a general assignment reporter covering Laconia and the Lakes Region of New Hampshire. My coverage responsibilities include government and schools, features and breaking news.



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