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FREE

Proposed Belmont Mill renovations spark debate at deliberative session

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BELMONT — The Town of Belmont held their first deliberative session last Saturday morning where each of this year's 27 proposed articles will move on to the official Town Warrant for public vote in March, but it wasn't an easy journey for a few of them.

Among the most debated of the proposals voters will see on the ballot was Article 3, asking for the town to approve \$3,357,250 for renovations to the historic Belmont Mill building.

Budget Committee Chair Ron Mitchell addressed the topic and began by stating, "We felt the voters had the right to decide on this amount of money and we support it."

Mitchell recapped the last renovations on the building after a devastating fire all but destroyed the property in 1992. He said that the major rebuild more than a decade ago was done by the lowest bidder, a road contractor who had never before taken on a project of that type.

"The town had no SEE **BELMONT**, PAGE A8



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Belmont Budget Committee chair Ron Mitchell explains Article 3 on this year's town warrant that will ask voters to approve \$3.3 million for repairs and renovations to the historic Belmont Mill building. Looking on are selectmen Ruth Mooney, Ron Cormier and Jon Pike, along with Town Moderator Alvin Nix (standing).

BELMONT

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

oversight on the building back then, and we're paying the price for that now," said Mitchell.

Since that construction, continuous problems have cropped up in the building. From almost Day 1, tenants renting space in the mill have reported problems and recently the roof had to be repaired to the tune of approximately \$80,000.

Some of the other troubles have now become critical, like the flooring of the fourth floor.

During a recent engineering review to look at what ails the historic building, it was also discovered that critical damage from the fire still exists on one exterior brick wall. All of it, Mitchell said, is adding up the cost of the repairs but are still needed to preserve the building.

"If we're going to do this, let's do it right this time, so it's not a burden on the town," Mitchell said.

Plans for the mill building would include office space for town officials along with a large public meeting room. The town's welfare offices would also be moved to the mill and the Corner Meeting House would then be used by the Parks and Recreation Department.

The work would be done through a \$2,957,250 bond and \$400,000 from the Municipal Facilities Capital Reserve fund. That would all translate into a tax increase of 48 cents/\$1,000 property valuation for the first year (2016) and drop to 47 cents/\$1,000 thereafter until it is repaid.

The article will need a three-fifths voter approval.

Resident Donna Hepp disagreed with the proposal however, and presented an amendment to Article 3.

In her amendment, Hepp called for lowering the request to \$1 million dollars, \$600,000 by bond and \$400,000 from the Municipal Facilities Capital Reserve Fund, to make only the immediate repairs needed to

preserve the building and not turn it into town offices for 20 people.

While she voiced her support for the historic building, Hepp felt the \$3.3 million price tag might be too much for tax payers to handle.

"The price tag may scare off the support that the mill needs," she said.

She suggested making the repairs then renting the space at the current market value instead of the low rental fees currently being charged.

Town Administrator Jeanne Beaudin explained that the terms of the grant used to originally restore the mill restricts usage and rental fees until 2019 however. Due to the repairs needed, current occupants, with the exception of the Senior Center, will also be moving out of the building and she did not anticipate they would want to move back.

Mitchell and selectmen made the case that the current town hall is also in dire need of repairs and felt it unwise to put any more money into an aged building that does not even meet the needs of the town.

"We could kill two birds with one stone—restore an historic building and get a new town hall," said Selectman Ron Cormier.

In answer to a question on what would become of that building if offices are moved to the

mill, Selectman Ruth Mooney said, "We'd probably tear it down and add parking. We feel we need that added parking. But, we listen. If someone comes up with a better idea, we're open to it."

Tina Fleming of the Budget Committee said she thought the selectmen's proposal was sound.

"For \$3 million, we'll have a new town hall and a showcase in the community," she said.

Cormier added that the board has been told many times to develop a plan for the downtown area. A doctor's office is interested in possibly moving into the former bank building, and with the town offices at the mill, the recreation department's needs would be met, there would be more parking and the mill would be saved.

"In the 11 years I've been involved, this is the best plan we've

seen," he said.

Hepp's amendment ultimately failed and the article was placed onto the warrant for voters to now decide.

Also up for consideration will be the \$7,257,691 operating budget that is up only \$205,172 over last year.

A contractual three percent raise for town employees is part of that budget but Beaudin and Mitchell explained that insurance expenses for the coming year are down 4.6-percent and the new trash collection contract also meant a savings of \$140,000. After revenues, the town will only need to raise \$5,726,900 through taxes in order to meet that budget.

"The cost of running the town has been kept to a minimum this year, and I want to thank everyone for that," Mitchell said.

Other articles will ask for funds to be

placed in a variety of capital reserve accounts that will then be offset through users fees or Highway Block Grant funds.

Article 6 will also request permission for the Fire Department to use funds that have been put aside from their fire/ambulance revenues account to purchase a used ladder truck.

Selectman Jon Pike explained the present ladder truck was purchased used several years ago and is now more than 20 years old

and "suffering."

"It still has trade-in value, though, and they can get a pretty good truck that way," he said.

Finally, a petitioned article will seek to rescind the present SB2-format for town meeting and revert back to the traditional town meeting where discussions and voting on the town warrant are held on the same day.

A public hearing on that topic will be held on Monday, Feb. 23, at 5:15 p.m. in the Corner Meeting House.