

Belmont Mill's future at stake

Selectmen decide to have a town forum to discuss options for historic building

By TIM CAMERATO | Mar 17, 2015

3



Photo by: TIM CAMERATO/CITIZEN

BELMONT'S BOARD OF SELECTMEN will host a town forum to discuss options for what to do with the historic Belmont Mill building.

BELMONT — The Board of Selectmen are looking to residents for ideas on what can be done with the Belmont Mill, after a warrant article calling for its renovation was overwhelmingly defeated at the polls last week.

Article 3 failed by a vote of 467 to 164. It called for \$3,357,250 to refurbish the mill building into the next town hall. Of that money, \$2,957,250 was to be raised through the issuing of bonds. Another \$400,000 would have come from the Municipal Facilities Capital Reserve.

During Monday's meeting, selectmen agreed to host a public forum, tentatively scheduled for May 4 at 7 p.m., where ideas for the building can be shared. Afterward, a survey will go out to residents asking what degree of repair they would approve of and what they want to see the building used for.

Selectman Jon Pike said he believes the board has been "neglectful" and doesn't advertise enough. He said it was evident to people working the polls on Election Day that a lot of residents voted "no" on every article.

When Selectman Ronald Cormier said it's been that way for a long time, Pike replied he believes that's not an answer. Pike suggested the board have a public meeting to ask residents what they want to see the mill become.

"By having a public hearing, if that's what we're going to do, we're throwing it at them," Selectman Ruth Mooney said.

Cormier predicted the same 10-15 people will speak that the board has heard from previously. Pike said he doesn't care if they get "50 different options."

If that happens, he said they will hold those suggesting plans accountable and put their names and ideas in a newspaper ad. That way, people will be better exposed to all possible plans.

Mooney said they should send anybody who has written a letter to the editor an invitation from the board to the public hearing. She also suggested creating a Facebook page to help connect with the community.

Cormier said every ballot is a little different but in the past three to four years, the selectmen have gotten close to what they ask for. He said the “no” vote on the mill vote doesn’t surprise him, although the wide margin did.

“Given that most of the people we talked to want to do something, they have varying degrees of what that something is, it did surprise me the fact that they don’t even want us to put to do anything with it,” Cormier said, referencing vote of 307 to 295 against putting \$125,000 into the town’s Capital Reserve Fund.

Cormier said the building should be knocked down.

“I’m tired of this. Every time we try to do something, everyone comes running out of the woodwork and says ‘Oh, that’s too much money! It’s too much money!’” Cormier said. “Well, you know what’s not too much money? Tear it down.”

Mooney said that’s easier said than done, since there’s still incoming grant money and a contract with the doctor’s office on the third floor.

Pike said they could tear down the building after a board vote but he doesn’t want to make that threat or for it to come forth.

“I’m ready to make it,” Cormier said.

Pike said people have asking them to do something with the mill and that’s what the board should plan for in the upcoming years.

“With the exception of the money that we’d owe the government for the mill, tonight, we could vote to demolish the bank, and the mill and done,” Pike said. “The next thing we’re going to have an injunction from...”

“That’s fine. Go get a damn court injunction. I want somebody to step the hell up, get a damn court injunction and say ‘No. We don’t want to tear it down. We want to fix it,’” Cormier said. “OK, then tell me where I can get the money to fix it, if you don’t want to tear it down.

“I want to flip it over on them,” Cormier said.

Pike said that’s what the forum would do. He said the board can no longer use the word “I” instead of “we.”

“We got them involved when you, and that Heritage Commission and everyone downtown became ‘we’ and made the streets look nice,” Pike said. “That’s a ‘we’ project.”

“Then we should tear down the mill,” Cormier said.

He then agreed to hold the meeting, obtain about four to six options and send out a survey afterwards. Town Administrator Jeanne Beaudin suggested they hire a facilitator for the forum. She said Michael Ciance, a member of the Plan NH board of directors, would be a good person to approach.

The board also agreed to use SurveyMonkey as part of the survey. Plans on where the meeting will take place have not been set.