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Independent evaluation of Belmont Mill concludes building is 'worth saving'

# INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OF BELMONT MILL CONCLUDES BUILDING IS 'WORTH SAVING'

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BELMONT – After a listening session facilitated by Castagna Consulting Group brought nearly 50 people to the high school to discuss the future of the Belmont Mill on May 9, Castagna released its final report to the selectmen a few weeks ago.

In it, Castagna identified some of the structural issues including a heating ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) system that needs replacing, the floor softness in parts of the fourth floor and some mold issues within the entire building.

Castagna added the exterior brick work need repairs and there is a plan for that created by the companies hired to evaluate the mill and enable the town to put an amount on the bond issue.

They noted the doctor's office, Belknep Family Health Care, occupies the entire second floor and is looking to expand. The Lakes Region Community College is gone and the childcare center on the first floor is moving to larger quarters in another Belmont location.

Castagna also drew the conclusion that the Belmont town hall operates

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from some small cramped quarters and that the nearby former bank remains standing but empty "yet in control of the town". Castagna also recognized that the Parks and Recreation Department and the Police Department also work in limited spaces.

While a few people who attended the session recommended selling the mill, the report said that has its drawbacks because only the building can be sold — not the land under it — meaning a long-term lease would be needed.

Anyone purchasing or long-term leasing it must anticipate a \$3- to 4-million repair and the federal grant used to refurbish it originally in the 1990s would need to be paid. The outstanding balance is \$200,000.

The plus side, said Castagna, would be the town wouldn't have to worry about operating expenses and would no longer be a landlord. The down side is a new owner could tear it down unless the town negotiated a deed restriction.

Castagna recommendations are based in part on what it heard from town and from what it learned from the teams who examined the mill to determine how much money should be put on the March bond warrant.

"First and foremost, in my opinion," wrote the author of the Castagna report, "The mill building is worth saving."

"For an industry perspective, the cost for the repairs is economically viable," reads the Castagna report. But it will, said the report, take 7 to 10 years to become viable.

The reports highlights three options with Belknap Family Health Care, the worst of which is its complete departure from Belmont Village and something no one who came to the May session wants to see.

The best option for Belmont is to sell the building to LRGHealthcare of Laconia and let it become the owner/manager/landlord.

In the middle, the town could rent additional space to the Family Health Care group, pay for necessary building repairs, pay off the grant, and renegotiate the lease so in the short term the repairs can be offset by rent.

The report drafters noted that if the doctor's office stays it is likely the senior center will stay as well.

Castagna also recommended establishing a facility maintenance fund. Selectman Ron Cormier said there is a capital facilities fund that has been used in the past for maintenance. He said if the mill bond passed, much of it would have gone to that project.

Castagna recommends a town facility committee that would hire professionals as needed for facilitation and vetting operations.

"Make the process transparent to avoid the inference of backroom deal making," said Costagna.

Following a resolution for the mill, the company told the town to then focus on its other building needs like town offices, the bank building, and the Gale School.

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