

Dollar-free Belmont Mill articles occupy Budget Committee



Some town officials say the Belmont Mill building, if renovated, could house town offices, which are overcrowded. Three warrant articles on Feb. 4 will ask voters for direction. (File photo)

By DAVID CARKHUFF/THE LACONIA DAILY SUN

BELMONT — Amid a proposed budget of \$9.83 million in appropriations, and 37 warrant articles, the Belmont Mill dominated discussion at Tuesday's town Budget Committee meeting — even though the mill isn't a budget item for the town's Feb. 4 deliberative session.

Articles 6-8 on the 2017 Town Meeting warrant ask voters if they want to renovate, demolish or sell the mill building, respectively.

Budget Committee member Preston "Pret" Tuthill said, "I'm just wondering if there should be some dollar amounts attached to these."

Ruth Mooney, chairman of the Belmont Selectmen, replied, "We have no idea what the dollar amounts could be." The 1833 brick structure, originally built by the Gilmanton Village Manufacturing Company, has spurred back-and-forth debate about whether the town should try to keep and restore it.

Renovation could involve the entire historic building or a single floor, Mooney said.

"I don't know at this point if we know what the value is of that building," she said.

A "yes" vote to demolish the building could leave the town lacking adequate office space, Mooney said.

"This is only a guideline," Mooney said of the warrant articles. "We're trying to get some idea of what the taxpayers want us to do."

Tuthill concluded, "This is beyond the purview of the Budget Committee."

But the mill's future dominated discussion before the Budget Committee, in a meeting where the board voted to approve its 2017 budget recommendations.

A warrant article calling for the Belmont Mill's renovation was defeated by Belmont voters in March 2015. The proposal called for dedicating \$3.36 million — most of it in bond funding — to refurbish the building and move town offices there.

Now, with grants running out that bind the town's use of the mill building, Mooney said Belmont will have a free hand.

"We're looking for public opinion. What do they want to do?" she said. "We had two or three public hearings and we got these three questions from the residents who were here."

During Tuesday's meeting, Mooney and several Budget Committee members commiserated about the uncertainty when dealing with Town Meeting votes.

Mooney said, "Whether we (will) get a clear picture from this or not, we have no idea."

Surveys fail to generate response, she said, so a town vote is one of the few ways to garner feedback.

In January 2015, selectmen estimated the amount spent to date on renovations of the Belmont Mill at over \$1 million. On Tuesday, Budget Committee Chairman Ronald Mitchell said, "We've invested a lot of money in this building over the years. To say we'll just tear it down after we've invested all this money in it, I can't see that is an option."

Tuthill said the discussion will happen in earnest at deliberative session.

A 1992 fire damaged the Belmont Mill. A court order halted demolition of the mill building, and a preservation effort spurred acquisition of two grants totaling \$1 million to rehabilitate the building. Voters approved a \$215,000 bond as a grant match. In 1998, the "Belmont Mill Community Center" opened.

The Belmont Mill is one of seven properties statewide added to the New Hampshire State Register of Historic Places.

The candidacy filing period runs from Wednesday, Jan. 25, to Feb. 3. At 10 a.m. Saturday, Feb. 4, the deliberative session of Town Meeting takes place at Belmont High School. Voting takes place from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Tuesday, March 14, at the high school.