

Vote on Belmont Mill fuels broader review of historic properties



A bicyclist passes the historic Belmont Mill, where medical and senior services are located. A town committee will take up the charge of studying the building's potential as town offices. (David Carkhuff/Laconia Daily Sun)

By DAVID CARKHUFF, LACONIA DAILY SUN

BELMONT — Voters opposed the demolition of the historic Belmont Mill building on March 16, but the fate of the four-story landmark remains unclear

A new committee aims to sharpen that picture, and some are advocating a broader look at historic structures in town.

Articles 6-8 at Town Meeting asked voters if they wanted to renovate, demolish or sell the Belmont Mill.

Voters supported the future renovation of the Belmont Mill for use as town offices and other community purposes by 440-267; they opposed future demolition of the building by 170-522; and they narrowly supported the future sale of the building 383-320.

Kevin Sturgeon, a newly elected Planning Board member, said he is a volunteer on a newly forming committee that will review options for dealing with historic properties, including the Belmont Mill.

The Belmont Mill building was rehabilitated with federal grant money, so only certain uses are permitted during the life of the grant. That grant and its restrictions expire in two years, officials say.

By then, Sturgeon hopes the town could have an idea of how to juggle an assortment of historic and often underutilized buildings.

"We don't ever get anything to go forward because everybody wants to know the big picture," Sturgeon said. "It's been stated that the police department is really, really, the words were 'bursting at the seams.'"

Based on a tour, he confirmed it's crowded in the police station, located next to the Corner Meeting House, where the welfare office is located.

Nearby in Belmont, the existing Town Office building is only usable on the first floor. The second floor was never utilized for town offices and needs structural work to be occupied, the town reported. Accessibility to meet current codes is also an issue, according to the town.

"But if we use the Mill building for town offices, that building's big enough. It's four stories," Sturgeon said. "Supposedly, two floors is going to satisfy all of our needs for the town hall, so that's going to leave us two more floors. If we empty out the Corner Meeting House and we no longer use it, that's another building we have to talk about. What are we going to do with it?"

The former Northway Bank building located at 154 Main St. also needs to be considered, Sturgeon said.

The Belmont Board of Selectmen received cost estimates from contractors to convert the former Northway Bank building into a community recreation center. Nearly \$50,000 would be needed to replace floors, install security systems and make the building ADA-compliant, the town learned last year.

The Mill building could be restored in phases, Sturgeon said, avoiding a large bond.

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.

In January 2015, selectmen estimated the cost of renovations at over \$1 million.

But selectmen have struggled with the lack of clarity in local opinion. Recently, board members noted that a recent survey on the subject failed to generate a definitive response.

Sturgeon said the Town Meeting vote, which involved the three questions without costs attached, still left some room for uncertainty.

"The interesting thing was it was really close on the (proposal to) save it, and there were almost 400 votes to sell it," he said.

"Hopefully, when this committee forms, we can be unified in the end," he said.

Selectman Ruth Mooney said any decision would go to the voters.

"The board's feeling at this point is we will wait and see what this group will come back to us with. We still have two years on our grant money," she said.

"We're trying to, hopefully, get a game plan," Mooney said.

"Obviously, just looking at the numbers, it was higher to save it," Mooney noted, but she said another town vote will be needed.

"Anything that happens with those will have to go to the voters. That's not a decision that we as a board are going to make," she said.

Mooney said the three questions on the warrant came from the public. "The questions were basically survey questions," Mooney said.

But the effort remains grassroots. Donna Hepp circulated a letter prior to town sessions, and at the deliberative session of Town Meeting she volunteered to form the committee to look into town buildings, including the Belmont Mill.

"I think the board as a whole, we're open," Mooney said.

But cost could change the outcome.

"When we brought it before the voters two years ago, I believe it was over \$3 million to do the whole thing, and that got shot down. If we had brought it back again this year, would it have passed? I doubt it," Mooney said.

"Taxes haven't gone down. They've only gone up. And we get less and less help from the state," she said.

- About the Belmont Mill:

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

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.

In 2011, the Belmont Village landmark was cited by the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance as one of the state's 25 Milestone Preservation Projects over the last quarter century, and the Mill project subsequently received a preservation award from the Victorian Society in America/New England chapter, marking only the fourth New Hampshire endeavor honored by this national and international nonprofit organization.

Today, the Belknap Family Health Center and Belmont Senior Center occupy the Belmont Mill.

