

Belmont Voters OK Restoration Of Historic 163-Year-Old Mill

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BELMONT - Voters approved a \$1.35 million plan to restore a 163-year-old mill at a special town meeting Tuesday night, 70-28, or four votes more than the two-thirds needed for passage.

The \$215,000 bond issue will help finance the project. Townspeople also approved the use of \$95,000 in surplus funds.

The bulk of the money for the restoration, \$1 million, will come from two Community Development Block Grants the town received last week. The town applied for \$700,000 for the project and Belknap County sought a \$300,000 grant.

The Office of State Planning said that it will award **Belmont** \$181,000 this year and the remaining \$819,000 next year.

Only one person spoke against the proposal, former Selectman Mark Mooney, who maintained the mill is not structurally sound and the repair costs may exceed the estimates.

He said the town will be put in the position of being the developer and owner of the mill and that if any tenant pulls out, it will put the town at financial risk. But Ken Knowlton said preserving the mill offers the town a unique opportunity to hang on to part of its heritage and use it in a way to benefit the downtown area and provide services for senior citizens.

He said if the mill is demolished, the property would probably not be used for several years and might end up as a the site for apartments, which would require more in terms of town services than would be paid in taxes.

Town Administrator Matthew Upton said the town will be in a position to know if costs will exceed estimates by the time it is ready to spend any of the money it has appropriated and will bring the issue before voters again if that happens. The historic mill, built in 1833 and featured on the town seal, was badly damaged in a fire four years ago. The town took control of the property through a tax deed last year and when the town's application for a grant to rehabilitate the mill was denied, selectmen began working on demolition of the mill complex.

But a group of concerned citizens won a court injunction last September, halting the demolition project and winning time to develop a funding package to allow it to be repaired.

Members of the Office of State Planning participated in townwide planning sessions early this year when plans were developed for use of the mill.