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NEWS

Wednesday, June 26, 2002

Study for new Town Hall approved

By GEOFF CUNNINGHAM Jr.
 Staff Writer

BELMONT — Selectmen Tuesday authorized a study committee to spend up to \$9,000 to begin looking into the possibility of building a new town hall/municipal building.

Officials say that if such a project is found to be appropriate, residents could see a proposal for a 7,000-8,000 square foot building on the warrant for the next Town Meeting.

Town Administrator Donald McLelland brought the concept to the Board of Selectmen on Tuesday saying that a Town Hall Study Committee has been formed to address what is recognized as a need for more space to handle growth.

The committee is comprised of McLelland, Town Planner Candace Daigle, Town Land-Use Technician Rick Ball and Budget Committee Chairman Ron Mitchell.

McLelland said that the committee is currently eyeing the possibility of building a new municipal office building on an approximate 7-acre parcel of town-owned land next to the Belmont Mill.

He prefaced Tuesday's discussion of the matter by talking about what has been identified as increasing space concerns at the current Town Hall.

According to McLelland, increased demands on all town offices and departments have left quarters tight and the old building strained.

"I don't think anyone can disagree that this building is simply too small," said McLelland, pointing out that some departments have had trouble finding space to put locking file cabinets where their load would not create a structural hazard.

"We are just running out of room," he said.

In recent years, the town has put significant amounts of money into the building to keep it up to code and safe. Two years ago, \$13,000 was spent to put a new roof on the building and last year, \$5,000 went towards repairing failing trusses which were causing the roof to sag.

While the town has looked at expanding into the building's upstairs, McLelland said that such a proposal would likely require the structure to be entirely rebuilt.

He said that consensus of his committee and the town's Master Plan Facilities Committee is that the current building has simply "outlived its usefulness."

And so the town will now look at building next to the mill, a move that McLelland said would complement the downtown area. He added that the committee would look at possibly selling the old town hall to offset costs or, if feasible, turn the building into a community center.

The town administrator said that his committee will use no more than \$9,000 from his administrative engineering budget to hire an architect to begin conceptualizing such a new building.

The study committee hopes to have conceptualized drawings, a general floor layout and estimated costs by the coming budget season.

On Tuesday, town officials said that now is as good a time as any to look at building, considering low interest rates.

"You're never going to borrow money any cheaper than you can now," remarked Selectmen Reginald Caldwell.

And while the project is still in preliminary stages, selectmen endorsed the investigatory spending unanimously.

McLelland indicated at the meeting that if the such a project is found to be feasible, he fully intends to bring the project to voters this coming March.

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