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This schematic rendering shows how the \$2.3 million town hall being proposed for Belmont would look. (Citizen Photo/Bill Watt)



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Belmont town hall proposal unveiled

Voters to decide on plan in March

By GEOFF CUNNINGHAM Jr.

Staff Writer

BELMONT — Selectmen have approved bringing a \$2.3 million proposal for a new town hall to voters at this coming March's Town Meeting.

Town officials say that the current town hall is no longer adequate for Belmont's needs and that "deplorable" working conditions warrant bringing the issue to voters.

By a unanimous vote, selectmen on Wednesday advanced the proposal that would see an approximate 10,000-square-foot municipal building constructed on seven acres of town-owned land next to the Belmont Mill.

The voted followed a presentation by the architectural firm of Sherman, Greiner, Hallé Ltd.

Architects from the firm have been working with a town study committee for months to plan a new building that would meet the town's need for office space. The study committee was made up of town officials, employees and individuals experienced in the construction field.

On Wednesday, architect Jonathan Hallé outlined site plans, floor plans and elevations for a two-story building.

The building would be located between the mill and a residence.

Hallé said the proposed building's exterior design and materials, a combination

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of siding and brick, would allow it to blend with the architectural character of the village area. The building's roof would have two gables.

The proposed building's interior design calls for two main office spaces that are divided in the center by a small atrium. The first floor would contain a meeting/conference room, general assistance desk, the town clerk's office, and a lounge for employees. The second floor would house the town's administrative offices, a computer room, the land-use department and the assessing office.

Plans also call for a full basement that could be used for storage and an elevator that would allow access to all three levels.

Many areas within the building would have enhanced security to prevent unauthorized entry.

As presently configured, the building would be separated from the mill building by a driveway, with a planted median strip. The driveway would lead to a rear parking area that would run adjacent to Tioga Brook.

Officials said the plan was selected from three conceptual designs as the most "efficient and economical" choice for the town.

Town Administrator Donald McLelland Sr., who sat on the town hall study committee, said that the building would satisfy the town's needs and is designed so that it could accommodate future expansion.

"This building as it is designed right now is good for a minimum of 30-50 years," he said.

The town began studying the possibility of constructing new municipal offices because of overcrowding and safety concerns in the current town hall building, a structure that is said to be over 100 years old.

McLelland and others say that the town has spent considerable money in recent years fixing up a building that simply can't handle the growing needs of the community.

On Wednesday town officials pointed towards ventilation, roof and space concerns as among the reasons that the building isn't suitable.

"The working conditions in the existing town hall are poor at best," said McLelland.

Selectmen's Chair Doralyn Harper, who worked in the building as a town employee for a number of years, agreed calling it a "deplorable" working environment.

"Nobody should have to work like that," she remarked.

Officials say the current building hasn't the size to accommodate all of the town's workers. They said town employees are cramped and literally running into one another.

The proposed building would nearly double the amount of working office space available to municipal staff.

While only a handful of residents attended Wednesday's session, a few did ask if

the study committee looked only at simply building a new town hall. More than one asked if the existing building could be refurbished and made suitable for town hall use.

They were told that the building would have to be almost completely overhauled, a task that would prove costly considering that the building might still fall short of meeting the future growth of the town.

"Putting more money into that building ... I think ... would be a waste of money," said McLelland.

David Morse asked if the committee looked at moving the town hall to another existing building in town that might be purchased for such usage.

McLelland explained that no such building exists and pointed out that the intent is to keep the town offices in the village center where they are most readily available to the population.

Jeffrey Marden asked what the fate of the existing town hall would be should the new building be passed in March.

McLelland said that town would try to sell the building and use the proceeds to help offset the tax impacts that would result from bonding the new construction.

And while some had concerns regarding the potential tax impacts of such an endeavor, the board said that it felt it was important to offer voters a chance to decide on the proposal.

"I truly believe we need to bring it forward to the voters. As a member of this board, I think the way to go is to present it," said Harper.

The chair went on to say that the proposal is overdue, whether it is supported by voters or not.

"This is something that has been a long time coming. This should have been done a long time ago," she said.

The town hall proposal will now be presented to the Budget Committee at a meeting scheduled for Jan. 7.

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