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Wednesday, January 9, 2002

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## Belmont drafts two Town Hall warrant articles

By GEOFF CUNNINGHAM Jr.

Staff Writer

**BELMONT** — Selectmen have approved a warrant article that will ask voters for money to renovate the existing Town Hall in the event a \$2.3 million proposal to build a new one is struck down at March Town Meeting.

Although they oppose putting any more money into the 100-year-old structure, officials say something needs to be done should voters fail to support construction of a new municipal building.

The proposed article was unanimously supported by the board at its Wednesday meeting.

It will ask voters to appropriate \$500,000 towards the renovation of the existing Town Hall, which has been described as no longer suitable to serve as the town offices.

The article will follow the request for \$2.3 million for a new building on the warrant and will only be acted upon should the former be defeated.

The proposal for the new Town Hall calls for an approximate 10,000-square-foot municipal building constructed on seven acres of town-owned land next to the Belmont Mill. Conceptual design and floor plans for the new building have already been drafted by architects hired by the town.

The renovation proposal was presented to the board by Town Administrator Donald McLelland Sr., who described it as a necessary evil.

"As a taxpayer I think it would be a waste of money, but we have to do something if it doesn't pass," he said.

The \$500,000 would be used to reconstruct the second floor of the building, repair its roof and add an elevator. The money would also fund a number of smaller renovation items that would be required to make the building suitable for use.

Members of the board who supported the article calling for a new building agreed with McLelland saying that voters must be given a second option.

However, more than one town official has said the existing building has simply outlived its usefulness in a town that has grown considerably in recent years.



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On Wednesday, town officials said they realize residents are concerned about the tax implications associated with a \$2.3 million project, but that the project is an inevitability.

"I realize that it's their money, but we had a responsibility to bring this to voters," said McLelland.

Public hearings on both Town Hall proposals will be held Jan. 22 at 6 p.m. at the Corner Meeting House.

In addition to approving the second Town Hall proposal, selectmen also approved a warrant article that will ask voters to appropriate \$10,000 to the Conservation Commission.

Members of the commission originally came to the board seeking an article that would give them all revenues generated from the sale of town-owned land.

Selectmen decided against supporting that initiative and favored a one-time appropriation that, if supported by voters, would see money coming from the town's undesignated fund balance (budget surplus).

The money would be used to purchase conservation lands deemed critical to the town.

In addition to these items, the board also approved adding money to the budget to cover what has already been a big snow year.

Selectmen approved adding \$12,000 to the proposed budget to buy more salt, pay more overtime to plow drivers and cover added grounds maintenance.

The panel also approved the hiring of a new police officer, who will fill local department's last vacant slot. Jason Fiske, a native of Loudon, will join the force and attend police academy this spring.

The board also approved a item that will give the Recycling Committee \$4,600 so that it can continue studying the feasibility of bringing a proposal for a facility to the community.

Selectmen approved the additional money following a presentation from the committee that showed that building a facility could cost between \$800,000 and \$1.4 million. The estimates only cover building costs; the range accounts for different options and the difficulties that could be encountered depending on what site is chosen.

The committee will continue to work with SEA Consultants Inc. of Concord to determine if such a project is right for the town.

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