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Wednesday, January 15, 2003

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Belmont Budget Committee won't endorse new town hall

By GEOFF CUNNINGHAM Jr.

Staff Writer

BELMONT — The Budget Committee on Tuesday voted not to endorse a warrant article asking voters to appropriate \$2.3 million for a new town hall.

While nobody at the meeting debated the need for new town offices, members opposed the proposal, saying that it came with too little notice and too big of a price tag for taxpayers to handle this year.

The panel also refused to endorse an alternative article that would earmark \$500,000 for renovation of the existing town hall.

The 5-3 vote against recommending the new town hall article came after more than an hour of debate.

Voting against the proposal were David Morse, Ken Knowlton, Norma Patten, Peter Gray Sr. and Ken Ellis. Reginald Caldwell, Wallace Rhodes and Michael Blanchard voted in favor of endorsing the article.

The matter will still be brought to voters this spring as the selectmen have already approved its placement on the town warrant.

The proposal for an approximate 10,000-square-foot municipal building to be 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.

A study committee put forward the plan after deeming the current town hall unfit to serve as the town offices and can no longer meet the needs of a growing community.

On Tuesday the plan was brought to the budget committee in the hopes that the panel would endorse it.

Town Administrator Donald McLelland Sr. explained to members that the current town hall has outlived its usefulness and that working conditions in the building can be described as "poor at best."

While the price tag for the project is intimidating to taxpayers, McLelland said, a new building is the proper solution to a problem that won't go away with time.



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However, before specifics of the proposal had even been presented, budget committee members questioned the timing and reasoning behind it.

Morse and Knowlton were among the more vocal opponents of the proposal.

Both said they didn't like the manner in which the project was brought before the committee.

Specifically, they said the project should have been thought-out over a longer time period to lessen the shock to taxpayers.

Knowlton said that while he realizes something needs to be done to better accommodate the town offices, he believes the project is too big for the taxpayers to absorb all at once.

The proposal called for the building costs to be paid for through a 10-year bond.

McLelland outlined for the committee members how much the project would cost if the town received an interest rate of 4.5 percent. His numbers showed that, if passed by voters, the proposal would impact the tax rate by 14 cents per \$1,000 in 2003 and 87 cents per \$1,000 in 2004 — the first full year that the town would begin paying for the project. From there the tax impact would reduce each year to a low of 65 cents per \$1,000 in the final year.

Current budget figures indicate that this year's municipal portion of the rate will drop from \$9.49 this year to \$9.09 in the coming one, he said.

However, Morse said he was concerned with indications that Shaker School District's budget will result in a substantial hike in that portion of the rate.

He said that a school increase coupled with a multi-million municipal project would be too much for taxpayers to handle.

Claiming to be the voice of the normal taxpayer on more than one occasion, Morse said that "a lot of taxpayers are running scared."

Ellis agreed, saying he feels the current economic situation makes the proposal a bad idea.

"I don't think, this year, that we can afford it," he said.

While several members expressed concern over the project's price tag, nobody debated the fact that something will need to be done about town offices in the growing community.

Committee Chair Ron Mitchell, who sat on the committee that studied the issue, spoke in favor of the plan saying that the project may be a tough pill to swallow, but one that needs to be taken.

He said that a number of factors, including the simple price tag, will never make supporting such a project desirable from a taxpayers standpoint.

However, he continued, "the problems aren't going to go away and the needs will still be there."

McLelland echoed Mitchell's sentiment saying that putting off the project isn't the answer.

"If you think it's a pleasant thing to bring a \$2.3 million project to people it's not, but is it the responsible thing to do ... absolutely," he said.

Debate over the issue became heated at times. However all of the parties agreed that the discussion was in the best interest of taxpayers.

The committee unanimously voted against endorsing a second article that would ask voters to appropriate \$500,000 towards the renovation of the existing town hall building.

Members said that the second article, which will only be voted upon if the \$2.3 million is struck down by voters, represents a "Band-aid" approach and will only put off the problem for a few years.

The committee's decision on the second article followed a discussion in which nearly every official agreed that renovating the existing town offices would be throwing money away due to the age, size and condition of the building.

Voters will be presented both town hall warrant articles at a public hearing scheduled for Jan. 22 at 6 p.m. at the Corner Meeting House.

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