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Local

[Home](#) | [Classified](#) | [Sports](#) | [Obits](#) | [Seacoast News](#) | [Search](#)

News
Citizen Home
Foster's Online
Election 2002
N.H./Region
Local
Seacoast
Sports Local
Sports National
Community Interest
Business Briefs
Business People
In the schools
Obituaries
Police, Fire & Court Logs
Editorials/Letters
Lotteries
Weather
Special Sections
Autos
HealthBeat
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Photo of the Day
Photo Galleries
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Web cams
Features
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Events Calendar
Courses
Classified Ads
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Back Issues
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Wednesday, January 22, 2003

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Hearing tonight on \$2.3 million Belmont Town Hall plan

By GEOFF CUNNINGHAM Jr.

Staff Writer

BELMONT — Should the town raise and appropriate \$2.3 million to build a new town hall?

Selectmen support the measure but the Budget Committee is recommending against it.

Tonight, it is the public's chance to weigh in on the proposal that will be put before voters this spring.

At 5:45 p.m., selectmen will hold two public hearings at the Corner Meeting House on two alternative measures aimed at improving the town offices.

Officials maintain the existing town hall building has outlived its usefulness, that working conditions there are "deplorable" and that the structure is in need of major renovations or replacement.

The first proposal, supported by selectmen, calls for a 10,000-square-foot municipal building to be constructed on seven acres of town-owned land next to the Belmont Mill.

Selectmen and other town officials say that, while the plan at \$2.3 million isn't cheap, it is necessary to meet the needs of a growing community.

However, the Budget Committee on a 5-3 vote last week opposed the measure. Members said they fear the tax impacts that would result from such a project.

Residents attending tonight's session will hear a presentation on the proposal and then have an opportunity to speak to it.

The public will also be briefed on a second proposal that asks for \$500,000 to renovate the existing town hall.

That article, which will only be voted upon if the \$2.3 million project is turned down by voters, is being put forward by selectmen as a second option.

However, members of the Board of Selectmen and Budget Committee have said they feel it would be wasting taxpayer dollars to put any more money into the existing building.

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- OPINION
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Committee rejects warrant article

Committee member now regrets his vote

By REBECCA TSAROS
Monitor staff

Belmont

BELMONT - The budget committee voted not to back a warrant article for a new \$2.3 million town hall or a secondary warrant for \$500,000 in repairs to the existing town hall Tuesday night, saying voters won't support either measure.

All members agreed the current building is unsafe and that the town does need a new town hall. They also agreed that now is the best time to borrow the money for it, but refused to back the new building because of the expense. The vote was five opposed and three in favor.

Members also unanimously said repairs would be too costly to taxpayers and refused to back a warrant that voters would look at only if the new town hall building did not pass.

Budget Committee member Ken Knowlton, who was one of the most vocal in opposition to the new building and voted against it, said yesterday he's changed his mind. "My initial reaction last night was knee-jerk," he said. "When I got home last night, I reviewed

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the figures and in my mind, this is something that should be done now."

If Knowlton had voted to approve the new building at the meeting, it would have been a tie.

The town portion of the budget will be down 40 cents this year without the new town hall. With it, the budget will go up 60 cents to 80 cents over a 10-year period.

"I intend to explain that I have looked at the facts and figures," Knowlton said. "I now feel it is a proper time to do this. But it's up to the voters."

Because the budget committee didn't approve either measure, the board of selectmen must review both warrants again, even though they already approved them at the Dec. 18 and Jan. 8 meetings.

A public hearing for both warrants has been scheduled for Wednesday at 6 p.m. at the Corner Meetinghouse.

(Rebecca Tsaros can be reached at 528-2027, or by e-mail at rtsaros@cmonitor.com.)

Thursday, Jan 16, 2003

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Richard G. Ball
 Land Use Technician
 143 Main Street, PO Box 310
 Belmont, NH 03220
 Voice (603) 267-8300 ext. 25
 Fax (603) 267-8327
 email rball@belmontnh.org
 Web <http://www.belmontnh.org>