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Thursday, January 23, 2003

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## Belmont scraps Town Hall plans

By GEOFF CUNNINGHAM Jr.

Staff Writer

**BELMONT** — Responding to opposition heard at a public hearing, selectmen opted not to put a proposed \$2.3 million municipal building to a vote this year.

As a result of actions taken following the hearing, both town hall articles have been removed from consideration on this year's town warrant.

The decisions followed a public hearing Wednesday evening during which residents told selectmen they have serious concerns about the tax impacts of a multimillion-dollar proposal for a new building.

More than one taxpayer asked the board to remove the article from this year's warrant, saying that the current economic slump coupled with big municipal projects could put taxpayers — particularly those with fixed incomes — in big trouble.

A variety of opinions and concerns were raised at the hearing, which drew more than 35 people to Corner Meeting House.

The session was held so that selectmen could solicit public input on two town hall proposals that were slated for possible votes this spring. Both came out of the belief that the current town hall, which is more than a century old, has outlived its usefulness.

The first and more controversial article would have asked voters to approve a \$2.3 million bond for the building of a new municipal building to house town offices.

The plan called for a 10,000 square foot municipal building to be constructed on seven acres of town-owned land next to the Belmont Mill.

And while the plans were detailed on Wednesday by Town Administrator Donald McLelland, it wasn't the design that concerned most residents.

A number of residents, who said they were retired and living on fixed incomes, voiced their distaste for what the project would do to their tax bills.

Bill Goetz, one of the more outspoken at the hearing, said he usually supports school and municipal projects despite being retired and on a fixed income.



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However, he said that the proposal was not a good idea during a period when tax bills are steadily increasing and the economy is down.

"This is not the time," he said.

Goetz asked the board to hold off on bringing such a proposal to voters.

"Please ... give us a sign that you are considering us and remove this from the warrant."

Resident Dave Landry agreed saying that, while something clearly needs to be done about the town offices, the timing is wrong.

Numerous individuals voiced concerns about what they will see in the way of tax hikes as a result of the unexpected financial burdens placed on the Shaker Regional School District.

However, some did speak in favor of the project, saying that the matter has been put off for too long.

Ken Knowlton, a member of the Budget Committee, said that he changed his mind about the project despite voting against having his panel recommend it on Jan. 14.

He said that municipal projects have been taking a back seat to school matters for too many years — a phenomenon that he said might never end and will likely always leave the town getting the short end of the stick.

Knowlton, like other town officials, urged voters to think long and hard about whether the town can afford to put off the project for any longer.

Resident Richard Ashbaugh, a retiree also on a fixed income, said he doesn't think the project's impacts are all that horrible in the first place.

Officials at the meeting pointed out that the town hall proposal, to be bonded over 10 years at a 4.5 percent interest rate, would have an impact of 87 cents per \$1,000 of assessed valuation during the bond's second and most expensive payback year.

However, many at the meeting questioned whether a new building was the best option.

Mark Condodemetraky asked town officials if they had factored in operational costs when determining what kind of an impact the project would have on taxpayers.

"That will affect the tax rate of everyone in here," he said.

Others questioned the design of the proposed structure and asked if a simple renovation might address the space and health concerns.

Selectmen and others responded by saying that, based on the cost of recent renovations and the condition of the building, they wouldn't recommend putting any more money into the current town hall.

It was for this reason that selectmen also decided on Wednesday that they would remove a second warrant article that would have asked voters for \$500,000 to renovate the building.

Selectmen originally approved the second proposal's placement on the warrant as an alternative in case the bond issue failed.

However, upon further thought, they decided against the article.

McLelland said that while voters won't see an specific town hall article this year, selectmen did charge him with looking at the matter during the next year.

He said that the intent is to further study the situation so that a proposal might be brought for a vote in 2004.

The board has put forward a plan that will budget \$75,000 to upgrade the existing building. This proposal, deemed as a "temporary solution," will have town departments shuffled within the existing building and would require enhanced use of the Corner Meeting House for conferences. Money for this proposal would come from the town's operating budget.

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