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Belmont shelves building plan

New Town Hall proposal won't be on March ballot

By GEOFF CUNNINGHAM Jr.

Staff Writer

BELMONT — Taxpayers won't see another proposal for a new town hall on next year's Town Meeting warrant.

However, a study committee will be preparing a report detailing all of the town's options in finding more space to house municipal offices.

Last week the Board of Selectmen heard a report from members of the Town Hall Building Committee — a panel that was formed after public opinion resulted in the board opting to scrap a proposal to build a new \$2.3 million town hall.

Residents attending meeting this winter told the board they would not support bonding for such a project, saying it was hasty and too costly.

Town officials have said the current town hall has outmoded and is deteriorating. A recent renovation project has lessened some of the problems, but officials say that action is a temporary approach to a larger problem.

The new study committee, made up of members of the public, is looking into what other options might be available in providing town workers with the space they need.

Committee Chair Ken Knowlton appeared before the board on Tuesday to brief them on their progress thus far.

He said the study committee is looking into a wide range of options.

One would involve town offices being housed in the historic Gale School — located behind Belmont Middle School.

The school is owned by the Shaker Regional School District, which has been looking into turning it into their administrative offices. A study by the district showed it would cost between \$850,000-\$900,000 to renovate the 1800s building for modern use as an office.

However, the school district, facing a considerable budget shortfall this year, asked for no money to undertake such a project.

Knowlton said the committee was looking into whether the school could be purchased and moved to the downtown for use by the town.

"It seems fairly obvious that the school doesn't want it, so we're looking at that option," he said.

The committee is also considering the benefit of joining with the school district to build one office building, a process that isn't uncommon in the state.

Knowlton added that the panel hasn't ruled out the possibility of putting up a new building to meet the community's needs.

He said the committee is currently in the process of looking at town hall buildings in towns comparable to Belmont. They are focusing on buildings in Pembroke, Franklin and Swanzey.

"It's not going to be cut and dry, but we want to do an overview of towns that are like us," said Knowlton.

The committee is also considering whether to renovate or add on to the existing Town Hall on Main Street.

Besides looking at the specifics of where space can be found, the committee is also preparing a laundry-list of information that it will seek to help in deciding which might be the best option.

Knowlton mentioned a capital improvement plan and buildout analysis as among the studies it would like to see done so it can better plan for the long term.

The committee is currently looking at a facility that will meet the needs of the town through 2025 when the town is estimated to have close to 10,000 residents.

Knowlton said the committee wants to look at every option so that it can have answers for residents when a proposal is put forward.

"We want to make sure we have every "T" crossed and "I" dotted," he said.

However, selectmen agreed it would be impossible for any proposal to be ready in time for placement on this year's warrant.

The committee will look to prepare a report on their findings by Town Meeting.

"This study is not going to be quick," said Knowlton.

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