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Belmont moves to build new town hall

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BELMONT — After 30 years of talking about building a new town hall, the Capital Improvements Program Committee has decided to take some action.

At its meeting Thursday night, committee members voted to include \$30,000 for the design analysis and \$75,000 as a starting point for the construction of a new town hall/police department in the first year of the five-year plan for capital projects.

The \$30,000 was already planned for a feasibility study to look at the possible need for a new police station. However, Brian Watterson, the selectmen's representative to the committee, said they already know there's a need for a new police facility and recommended the money be used instead for architectural designs of a new joint town hall and police station.

The town has seen the need for a new town hall for many years, explained Peter Harris, the Planning Board representative. Year after year the town has been spending money on repairs to the town hall, but it is still an old building with little space.

"It's time to tell residents we're serious," said Watterson. "I think the town hall is a priority and it should be on here and we should be planning for it. We do deserve these facilities. If we don't propose them we're never going to get them."

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The \$75,000 was also moved around for other areas within the Capital Improvements Program, which lists proposed capital projects over \$10,000 from 2006-2011. With the changes that were made, the committee approved the program and it will now be handed to the Planning Board to review. Nothing in the program is final, but rather is used as a planning tool by the town. All the projects included in the program still go before the voters at the annual Town Meeting.

There was also some discussion about increasing the amount put aside for the Parks and Recreation Department, which is also looking for a facility, from the current \$25,000 to \$75,000. Harris said that without a plan in place for what they intend to do, he didn't feel comfortable adding the extra money. In addition, it has been talked about on more than one occasion that if the police department gets a new station, the old station could be used to house the Parks and Recreation Committee.

Conservation land was also a hot topic of discussion during the meeting. Currently, the Conservation Commission requests \$25,000 annually to be put into a fund to help them purchase land for open space. At today's going rate for land purchases, the committee feels that \$25,000 is barely a drop in the bucket and also considered increasing their savings amount to \$75,000.

Right now the commission is in the process of purchasing a 258-acre tract of land along the tidal river basin to preserve and allow residents to use it for recreational purposes. Conservation Commission Chairman Ken Knowlton and others have mentioned that the land is large enough for 80 houses, which Watterson said makes him nervous to hear fretting that the members are creating their own form of growth management.

"The Conservation Commission needs to show the community some advantages of preserving land," said Watterson. "Right off the bat you're saying 80 houses is going to have a negative impact."

If the houses were modular homes or a trailer park, then possibly, but a developer could decide to build multi-million dollar homes there, or a 55 and older complex which would have a benefit on the tax rate, he explained. Although Knowlton said they were not trying to buy the land as a form of growth control, he disagreed that housing of any kind is beneficial to the town because of the services they require.

"Land with houses requires more services than land without houses," stated Knowlton. "What possible drawback do you see from having development on it? 80 homes are going to require services."

Saying the commission is not against preserving open space, Watterson said it is trying to buy the "Cadillac" of all properties in town and will possibly require a bond issue in the near future. He suggested the organization partner up with other state agencies to help fund the cost for buying land.

Knowlton said there were neither monies nor partnerships available from the state at this time. Watterson also wanted to see the Conservation Commission create some kind of plan to present to the people about their intentions over the next few years.

"I think the responsible thing is to present some kind of game plan. If you ask for a bond, the people are going to want to know," he said, concerned the organization might have overlapping bonds if they see another piece of property they want to purchase.

Everything the commission does is for the people and approved by the people, said Knowlton, adding that if residents want more land they will ask for another bond.

Harris said he feels the town should have a comparable mix of open space and development, but so far it has been all development.

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