

Belmont tries again to plan for office space

Written by Tom Caldwell

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BELMONT — An volunteer in the community has received the go-ahead to form a committee that would get voters behind a plan to address town government office space needs.

Donna Hepp took her proposal to the Belmont Board of Selectmen Monday night and found them to be very supportive, according to Town Administrator Jeanne Beaudin.

The town has been wrestling with facilities needs for some time, proposing a new town hall, which voters rejected in 2003, and renovation of the Belmont Mill as a town hall, which also failed, in 2015. At this year's Town Meeting, voters indicated the mill should be used for town offices or community services, or otherwise sold.

"Belmont voters are concerned about the tax rate and committing to significant costs for town facility improvements," Hepp said in her presentation.

The issue, she said, is, "What is the best way to house our town services, staff, and community programs in the future, and what will it cost?"

Beaudin said Hepp has been going through old records since she initially raised the issue during the town's deliberative session, and she will be coming back with recommendations on who should serve on the new committee.

Hepp suggested including people with experience in engineering, design, office planning, real estate and economic development. The group would assess the town-owned buildings for repair, modernization, and operating costs, also identifying office space needs for the town staff and community programs.

Hepp also suggested forming a broad-based "resource group" that would include members of past town hall and mill study committees, the Belmont Historical Commission, the library, community programs, and interested members of the public.

The selectmen and the community would remain involved in each step of the process, Hepp said.

"We have time to look at the big picture and present a clear and well-thought-out range of choices for taxpayers to consider," she said.

According to the proposal, the strategy committee and resource group would hold initial meetings in July, hold an open house at Old Home Day in August, develop draft options in September, and hold an open house and community feedback meeting in October. A draft facility strategy would go to the selectmen in November or December, with a question on the warrant for the town's deliberative session of Town Meeting.

In April, based on the ballot results, the committee would identify the next steps for facility planning and improvements, seeking partners and grants to implement the recommendations.
