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The Laconia Daily Sun

Belmont taxpayers will be asked to come to aid of historic bandstand

By Adam Drapcho
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BELMONT — When the bandstand in Belmont Village was built in 1908, it was created using labor volunteered by local residents who wanted to give their community a place to enjoy a concert on a summer evening and a piece of architecture of which they could be proud.

Although the bandstand's main architectural elements remain intact, decades without maintenance have left the structure in a state that begs attention. The town's Heritage Commission intends to ask voters in March to help provide that care.

Belmont was a different place 102 years ago. The mill, on the Tioga River, was keeping residents busy producing textiles and the village was growing up around the industrial facility. The lands surrounding the village were covered with farms and fields and the village was the center of commerce and entertainment for residents. Wallace Rhodes, chairman of the town's Heritage Commission and vice-president of the Belmont Historical Society said that the bandstand was built at the time that Old Home Day celebrations were rekindling pride in New Hampshire's towns and villages.

It's a testament to the importance of the bandstand that its builders saw fit to place it right in the middle of everything. It was built between the mill and a building that housed the town's hose company as well as the precursor to the town library. The band stand was also located near a foot bridge that was used by residents to cross the Tioga on their way to and from work at the mill.

Rhodes's earliest memories of the bandstand were in the last years of its original glory. In the 1940s, before the advent of television and interstate highways, Rhodes recalls coming to see concerts performed at the bandstand. By that point, many people drove to the concert and listened from the comfort of their cars, honking their horns instead of clapping after each song.

Five decades later and the village entered its darkest era, at least from an aesthetic standpoint. A massive fire ripped through the now-defunct Belmont Mill, which was left to stand for several years as a burned-out eyesore in the heart of the village. That era is over, and thanks to efforts of people such as Rhodes and Linda Frawley, vice-chairman of the Heritage Commission, a concerted and determined effort is well underway to revitalize the village and the pride that residents once felt in their town.

The mill has been reconditioned and is used to house various services and agencies, highlighted by the culinary arts program of the Lakes Region Community College and the local senior center. A holiday celebration, "Deck the Village" is beginning to pick up momentum and there are many improvement projects being planned, including lighting and sidewalk redesign, to enhance the area. At the middle of it all still sits the town's bandstand, which despite the fact that it hasn't been renovated for decades seems eager to be brought along as Belmont enters what Rhodes and Frawley hope is a new era of civic pride.

"It's beautiful," Frawley said of the bandstand. She's not alone in her estimation, either. The bandstand is considered to be one of the state's best remaining examples of Victorian-era band stands. "It speaks to 100 years of Belmont's evolution and the village — the changes in 100 years have all been witnessed by the bandstand."

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"The goal of revitalization is to make it more of a gathering place," Rhodes said about the bandstand. "Belmont has improved a lot in the past 10 years," he said. "There's more to life than getting on the interstate and going to a shopping mall."

The Heritage Commission's plan, which on Monday recently received the blessing of the selectmen and will next seek the same from the Budget Committee, is to ask voters in March to contribute to the moving and some needed maintenance of the bandstand.

Frawley said the project will include moving the bandstand about 15 feet closer to the library and to give the bandstand a stronger foundation and supports. The precise cost is unclear, though the commission has received one bid to do the job for \$20,000.

The Heritage Commission will contribute \$10,000 from its non-lapsing fund and intends to present a warrant article to voters for the remaining cost.

"We strongly believe in Belmont's future and supporting the village revitalization project," said Frawley, who thought that the bandstand represents a sometimes-forgotten "gem" in the center of the village. "The village is our identification as a community, it's the core of the community."

CAPTION for BANDSTAND in AA:

Belmont Heritage Commission chairman Wallace Rhodes and vice-chairman Linda Frawley think that the town's bandstand is deserving of a revitalization and plan to ask voters in March to assist in the effort. (Laconia Daily Sun photo/Adam Drapcho)