

Discussion of Renovation and Restoration of North Kingstown Town Hall
Town Council Meeting Notes
January 28, 2019

The North Kingstown Town Council met on Monday evening to discuss several different proposals on renovating and restoring the currently unoccupied historic Town Hall on 80 Boston Neck Road. Currently the town offices are in the buildings near the high school on Fairway Drive, having moved there several years ago due to concerns about Boston Neck Road Town Hall building health and other issues, some arising from mold, asbestos, etc.

In November, voters approved the use of \$5 million in bond money allocated to upgrading Town Hall along with other monies to be used for school facilities. The purpose of January 28th meeting was to begin discussion on how to proceed with the renovations.

Town Manager Ralph Mollis opened the discussion with a brief history of previous meetings on the issue and pointed out the town is looking for a long-term solution for use of the building.

He outlined the three options for the historic Town Hall that had been prepared for consideration:

- 1) To renovate and expand the building to allow all municipal offices to be included in the building with additional parking required to support employees and visitors. The cost of this option is estimated at \$12.5 million and would require going back to voters for additional funds to make the project possible.
- 2) To renovate and expand the building to a sufficient size to allow most town employees to return to the building and for Town Council chambers and additional meeting space for town boards and perhaps other civic functions. The cost of this option would also require going back to voters for additional funds. The estimated cost of this option would be \$8 million and also require additional voter approval.
- 3) To renovate the building to be used for Town Council chambers and community meeting space. This option would use the \$5 million approved by the voters at the last election.

All the options will require modifications to the additions made to the existing building and additional work to make the buildings ADA compliant.

Mollis said that a year ago he thought that option 1 was the best, because housing town employees and serving the public in the current, temporary school annex building wasn't in the best interest of the town. A year later, Mollis stated that he is not sure option 1 is best, because of a concern about the parking situation that would evolve from this configuration. Option 1 would likely require building parking spaces on the west side of Boston Neck, and present a concern about pedestrian safety crossing the road. The additional parking could also encroach on the War Memorial Park across from the Town Hall.

Town Council President Greg Mancini spoke next. He asked if for the time being, if option 3 were chosen, could the building later be converted to options 1 or 2 as funding became available.

Mollis responded that there would be additional costs associate with such a proposal, including moving HVAC etc. to the basement of the building. On top of the additional costs described above for options 1 and 2, there would likely be an additional \$0.5 million in other costs to make that happen.

Mancini asked the other Council members to focus on which option would be the best.

Mollis then added that if option 3 was chosen, it would free up space at the Fairway Drive Town Hall and that would give the town the opportunity to make that office location more visitor friendly.

Mancini said that the longer we wait on choosing an option, the more expensive it will be.

Councilwoman Mary Brimer stated that under the current situation, the entire \$27 million approved by the voters for school and town office purposes would result in no new buildings or services. She suggested a fourth option: to use the \$5 million in other ways, e.g., bring the Town Hall building up to code and ADA compliant and prepare it for use as community space like the Guild building in South Kingstown. She stated that at a meeting one year ago, Phil Bergeron estimated the cost of this would be \$1.6 million. An additional \$1.8 million could be used to add a 5,179 square foot addition to the Fairway Drive building with a new façade to make it more visitor friendly and house all town employees. Brimer also suggested that part of the remaining bond money might be used for the Old Town House building currently under restoration in the park below the Wickford El building.

Mancini thanked Brimer for offering a fourth option, but said it would need to be looked at in more detail later as the proposal was not brought before the Council before the meeting.

Councilwoman Stacey Elliott asked if Wickford El had been considered as an option for a new Town Hall. Several members brought up that it had been considered in the past, but that voters rejected it at a referendum some years ago.

Councilman Kerry McKay brought up the cost per square foot for different options and that it would cost \$450 per square foot to bring all offices back to the Town Hall. He and several other Council members had heard a presentation by a company at Quonset that builds 'flex space' for \$200 per square foot.

Councilman Richard Welch spoke and said that this is a town building that must be taken care of, a building constructed by Veterans of the Civil War, and not something we could or would build today.

Welch said that we shouldn't take down the additions, and that way space could accommodate all town employees. But he thought that all numbers proposed are unrealistic until the Town Hall's purpose is identified—will it be used as the seat of town government or for some other purpose? He stressed that it's not a simple solution and that the repurposing of Wickford El would not take the same level of spending.

At that point President Mancini asked for public input on the issues.

HistWick member Dave Wrenn spoke and said that the RI Historical Commission endorsed the idea of using the Town Hall for municipal offices and also that as a voter he voted on last year's referendum with the understanding that the \$5 million would only be used for restoration and renovation of the Boston Neck location, and that any change in use of this money would be regarded as disenfranchising the people who voted for the \$5 million. This sentiment was later endorsed by Councilmen Welch and McKay, and also by other residents that spoke.

Wrenn was encouraged by Mollis' statement that you could start with option 3 and then move to the other options. Wrenn pointed out that it's the base of local government; it's authentic and we should be proud of our town assets and take care of them. He agreed that we need to study all the assets, including Wickford El and

the Middle School. If the money is to be used for other purposes, we should go back to the voters.

HistWick member George Brennan spoke and said that he favored that \$12 million should be used for the full renovation, but recognized that in presenting the bond, that school needs are very important, too. Brennan stressed that *we should do something great* and he used the East Greenwich town offices as an example of how that was accomplished.

HistWick member Amy Sonder spoke next and said that she agreed with Wrenn and Brennan's comments. The Fairway Drive building was a temporary solution. It could be used for School Department needs as it's close to the high school, but should not be used for a town hall. A buildout for the Town Hall would be great and the parking issues could be resolved, perhaps through the purchase of neighboring properties.

She said that Wickford El is important in the discussion as it's a building owned by the town with 5 to 6 acres of land and located in the center of town. Before we send out an RFP for Wickford El, she thought important to look at the big picture.

HistWick member Carol Gibson spoke and said that while the idea of using the Town Hal or another town building like Wickford El for a Guild like the Peacedale Guild building is a good idea, we need to realize that that the Peacedale Guild is privately endowed. It's expensive to run that type of building and any comparison is like comparing 'apples to oranges'.

Mckay said that this is a complicated discussion, because the Town Hall is not the place for a 'Lean Government' building, yet \$12 million is a lot of money.

Mancini said that given the evening's discussion, and along with Brimer's fourth option, he recommended that discussion on the topic continue at the next Town Council meeting.

Mollis said that it was good that discussion was started and that there were multiple options on the table to consider at the next Town Council meeting.