

Minutes of Public Meeting  
Cornwall Capital Budget and Planning Committee  
April 8, 2015

The Cornwall Capital Budget and Planning Committee conducted a public meeting at the Bingham Memorial School Wednesday evening, April 8, to discuss plans for renovating and expanding the town office building. The committee has commissioned Vermont Integrated Architecture of Middlebury to draw up preliminary plans, for the project and the meeting was intended to give members of the community an opportunity to ask questions and contribute suggestions about the work to be done. The meeting was attended by members of the Capital Budget and Planning Committee, the Selectboard, and about a dozen other residents of Cornwall.

Sue Johnson, chair of the committee, opened the meeting at 7 p.m. and introduced Asher Nelson of Vermont Integrated Architecture, who explained that he wanted to engage the community early in the planning process in order to get a good sense of any concerns or opinions town residents might have about changes to the building. He said that information gathered at the meeting would help him to develop a preliminary schematic design, which would then be presented at another public meeting.

Ms. Johnson explained that the Capital Budget and Planning Committee is looking years into the future, and an addition is not likely to be built for some time. She added that having the preliminary design will enable the town to get estimates for the cost of the work to be done, which will enable the Selectboard and the town voters to decide how to proceed from there.

Ms. Johnson gave a brief report on the history of the Town Hall, which was built in 1882, with the kitchen addition on the back added soon after. The building changed little over the next 100 years, and by the 1980s it required substantial repairs. At the 1984 town meeting, the selectboard presented voters with three options: renovate the existing building, renovate the Daughters of the American Revolution building across the street and relocate the town office over there, or build a new Town Hall somewhere else. The town voted overwhelmingly to renovate the existing building. Over the next few years, major work was done on the foundation, roof, electrical system, insulation, and interior, and the vault for town records was constructed.

No other major work was done until 2008, when the town approved spending \$60,000 on work including a perimeter drain, a fire alarm system, repairs to the fire escape, and a new furnace. More recently, the cellar has been deepened and insulated, more work has been done on the wiring, and a generator has been installed so the building can serve as an emergency shelter.

Mr. Nelson explained that the major considerations in developing plans for renovating and expanding the building are:

- The need for more vault space for town records.
- Addressing accessibility and building-code issues.

- Improving energy efficiency.
- Providing more functional office space for the town clerk and other town officials.

In response to questions, Ms. Johnson noted that the need for additional vault space is a driving consideration because there is no feasible way to provide that within the existing building. She explained that the vault is surrounded by eight inches of concrete and is designed to withstand a four-hour fire. It contains land records, the grand list, and the town's vital records—all of which have to be kept forever—as well as town financial records and some school records. While some records have been digitized, the town is required to keep the original copies of many of them. In increasing vault capacity, the town should plan for at least the next 50 years, Ms. Johnson said.

The major problem with accessibility in the existing town office building is that people in wheelchairs cannot get to the upstairs meeting room. Mr. Nelson noted that if the building is modified, the state will require the town to move toward compliance with accessibility codes. That would require installing a lift as part of the proposed addition at a cost of about \$50,000. It was suggested that a possible alternative might be to avoid using the upstairs for any purposes that require public access, and put all public spaces on the first floor of the existing building and the addition.

Mr. Nelson asked those attending the meeting to comment on two possible strategies for designing an addition. One approach is to make it consistent with the original building; the other is to make it clearly distinct. Noting that the town office building is on the State Register of Historic Places, Mr. Nelson said that changes will have to be approved by the Division of Historic Preservation, which won't permit the addition to be indistinguishable from the original building. However, he said, it can share the same character in terms of design, construction, and materials. The general consensus at the meeting was that the addition should reflect the historic aesthetic of the other buildings in the center of town.

Another topic of discussion was energy efficiency. Mr. Asher noted that the best return on investment is to make the building envelope as well insulated as possible. Several people attending the meeting suggested that the project could be an opportunity to move toward net-zero carbon emissions, perhaps by using solar panels to generate electricity or a heat pump to warm and cool the building.

The meeting concluded with a discussion of the project's potential impact on the town budget. Several people observed that the state-wide discussion of school consolidation raises questions about the future of the Cornwall elementary school and what the future use of that building might be. Others noted that someday the town might be able to acquire the DAR building and move some town office functions over there.

In response to those concerns, Mr. Nelson repeated that this project is not on a fast track. His firm's assignment is just to develop a schematic plan that can be used to get cost estimates, which the town will need to make whatever decisions it is faced with in the future. Ms. Johnson concurred, saying that the purpose of the Capital Budget and Planning Committee is to anticipate future expenses and try to budget for them while keeping the tax rate stable.

Ms. Johnson thanked everyone for attending the meeting and contributing to the discussion. The meeting adjourned at 9 p.m.