

Herald Article October 30, 2008

Bethel Selectboard Supports Repair Of Town Hall

By Chris Costanzo



Bethel's Old Town Hall venerably rises high above the village at the north end of Main Street. (Herald / Bob Eddy)

After a generation of debate over the fate of Bethel's decrepit and currently unused old town hall building, the town's citizens will vote on November 4 whether to float a bond to restore the building for community use.

At an informational meeting Monday, Selectboard Chair Neal Fox noted that some townspeople had wanted to rehabilitate the building for a long while. Others, whom Fox characterized as "a vocal minority," have wanted to tear it down.

He also noted that, in the past, some have advocated merely keeping the building safe for the time being, until a better financial environment would allow for more work on it. According to Fox, the selectboard believes that the time has come for the voters to decide.

"And let there be no misunderstanding," he added, "that the selectboard believes that the complete rehabilitation of the town hall is the smartest thing to do at this time."

The catalyst for the bond vote is a recent \$301,000 federal grant awarded toward restoration of the Bethel Town Hall. In order to receive the grant, the town must contribute a matching amount. If the town were to borrow \$301,000 to match the grant, it would thereby make \$602,000 available towards the building's restoration, but it would not be enough to finish the job, and the building would not yet be usable. So the selectboard has instead recommended floating a 20-year bond for a larger amount that would make available \$1.3 million, which is the best estimate of the amount necessary for a complete restoration of the town hall.

Amy Bergamo, chair of the Town Hall Finance Committee, explained that the actual amount that the town would borrow would be reduced by the federal grant of \$301,000, and by an additional \$30,000 already available in the town hall fund and \$25,000 approved at the last town meeting. The eventual bond would actually be for only \$944,000, although for legal reasons, the bond authorization on the ballot must be cited for the complete \$1,300,000 amount.

Members of the town hall committee emphasized that once the voters approve the bond, then the bidding, contracting and actual work on the building would begin almost immediately, and the town hall would be available for public use as soon as the work is completed.

The finance committee's Paul Feeney explained that, at current interest rates, the bond would require 4.286 cents of property tax revenue per \$100 of property valuation.

Feeney was quick to note that over the past few years the town has been routinely appropriating \$25,000 a year towards the town hall fund, at a cost of 1.28 cents on the tax rate. Such

appropriations would stop if the bond is approved, thereby reducing the actual increase in the tax rate to just under three cents.

The tax increase would translate to a total of \$29.86 a year for a \$100,000 property, \$59.72 for a \$200,000 property, and \$89.58 for a \$300,000 property. Feeney noted that after the 10th year, the annual cost of the bond will start dropping.

Long-time Bethel resident David Umba expressed concern that the town and its residents are already experiencing difficulty "making ends meet." He questioned the appropriateness of adding to the tax burden at this time in view of Bethel's tax delinquencies and property tax foreclosures.

Bergamo and others on the finance committee conceded that Umba had a valid point, but noted that a functioning town hall building would offer some offsetting financial benefits to the town.

"Although the town hall is not going to be a major money maker, we are certain from our surveys that many groups will make use of the building," said Victoria Weber, who has been active in the town hall effort. She noted that the income thus generated would probably defray much of the annual \$7,000 that the town is now paying to heat and maintain the building as it is.

It was also noted that significant work has been done on the building already, such as replacing the rotting and rust-streaked roof, a recent project funded with a mixture of voter appropriations and generous private donations.

Some commented that given the current economy—with low interest rates and a decline in commercial activity—it would be particularly advantageous at this particular time for the town to borrow the whole amount to do the rest of the work.

"It will be much cheaper now than doing it in pieces in the future," Feeney said.

Davis Dimock, chair of the Bethel Planning Commission, pointed out that a restored town hall would go a long way towards revitalizing the town center, helping build the community, and eventually luring people to Bethel—all of which would be to the town's commercial advantage, especially if it increases the school population.

There will be a second informational meeting on the proposed town hall bond tonight (Thursday) at 7 p.m. in the school cafeteria.