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Bethel Votes To Bond \$1.3 Million for Town Hall

By Chris Costanzo

In a surprise for many people, the voters of Bethel overwhelmingly approved a \$1.3-million bond for the total restoration of their town hall building. The vote was 632 to 371.

The actual bond will be for about \$944,000, thanks to money that is already available as well as a \$301,000 federal grant. Estimates are that the 20-year bond will increase the property tax rate by less than three cents per \$100 of valuation, and will go lower during the second ten years

The old town hall building has been in disuse for many years. Its brick veneer exterior has been crumbling, the interior paint peeling, the main floor support weakened, the wiring antiquated, some beams rotting, and the foundation flooded.

Volunteers have dug a swale to alleviate the foundation water problem, and generous private donations have supplemented town appropriations that recently allowed the town to replace the building's rusted-out roof. But despite the aesthetic improvement from such efforts, the building has still presented a blighted look which, in the opinion of many, has slowed the development of Bethel's village.

Several years ago the suggestion of a much smaller bond for a partial improvement of the building met with considerable opposition from voters who, despite their appreciation of the town hall's iconic value, objected to the expense. The issue has polarized the town for almost a generation.

Yesterday's favorable vote is probably due in part to the once-in-a-lifetime federal grant arranged by Senator Leahy. Other factors were an understanding that postponement of the project would probably redound to greater expense later, the ardent public relations efforts of Bethel's town hall finance committee chaired by Amy Bergamo, and the unequivocal support of the selectboard. Still, many thought the bond would not pass, and very few predicted the massive vote in favor.

Wednesday an ecstatic Amy Bergamo told *The Herald*, "Many people have wanted a restored town hall for a long time, and now they will get one." Selectman Joe De Freitas, a supporter of the bond, said, "I'm particularly glad for those who worked so hard for the town hall over these years through so many ups and downs."

Charlene Bostom, who donated a good share of the expense of putting a new roof on the building thanked "all the people who have worked so hard over the years and to the voters for supporting the bond issue.

"There have been three generations of my family to use this building, and we would like to use it again to have a town bash to celebrate this event that has been such a long time coming."