

Old Town Hall Committee Town of Sterling

March 17, 2003

Report on interim actions and long term goals for the 1835 Town Hall

The Old Town Hall committee has been working since February 2001 to accomplish the following goals:

1. Formulate long term use proposal
2. Determine interim potential uses
3. Carry out immediately needed repairs
4. Submit an action plan to accomplish the above.

In the ensuing two years the committee has met regularly and has accomplished these goals. The purpose of this report is to update the Selectmen on the status of these items and to assist in planning action leading to the realization of the long term goals.

1. Long Term Use

The committee has concluded that the best use of the 1835 town hall is as a community center. The old town hall, situated as it is on the common, establishes much of the character of the Town of Sterling center and is a vital part of our New England heritage. This use is consistent with the past 167 years' usage. We could not easily afford to replace the structure, and maintaining it brings great benefits at a very modest cost.

It is proposed that the upstairs hall be retained as a large meeting space, complete with stage, seating, and audio visual systems. This usage will require handicapped access, which will be a major item in bringing the building up to any current requirements. It is strongly suggested that a sprinkler system be considered throughout.

The downstairs would also be kept in a form similar to its present layout, with the large meeting room in the rear and two or three other meeting rooms toward the front. A small kitchen area is suggested. The stairs, installed in the mid-1970s, need attention, as they are deteriorating and provide poor access to the upstairs.

The cellar, with its numerous support columns, is recommended for some secure storage closets for user groups. Part of the cellar may remain as municipal storage. The cellar will need to be kept clean and surplus items should be kept to a minimum. The septic system needs to be tied in with new capacity to be built behind the Fire station.

It is recommended that we keep as many of the original architectural features of the building as feasible. In particular, we have the original front doors and fan from the front gable, both in good condition. The Old Town Hall Committee is not suggesting restoration to 1835 configuration, as the building was lengthened in 1893, and many features have been permanently lost. Some, however, are worth saving. Stairways should be restored to 1835 configurations traceable from remaining wall sections and other buildings by the same architect/builder (John M. Springer) with similar entries. This would free up some internal space now occupied by the sprawling 1970s stairway.

Long term use as a community center is consistent with the Town Hall's original purpose. Meeting space in the downtown area is at a premium, and existing buildings are often unable to accommodate all of the group meetings that need space. A further advantage of having the building available is demonstrated by the usage of the EMS and Library. We anticipate that there will be times in the future when Town agencies need temporary space as changes occur, and the Town Hall can provide it.

2. Interim Use

In the two years since the Old Town Hall committee was formed, the building has been in use as office space for the EMS, meeting space for town committee and volunteer organizations, and most recently the housing of the Conant Library. Meeting usage has averaged 25-30 meetings monthly. Floor carrying capacity has been investigated, and safe limits established.

It is expected that the demand for use as community meeting space will continue after the Library moves into its renovated building. We are defining "interim" as that period prior to construction work required for safety, integrity, access, and preservation.

3. Immediate needs

The committee has worked to resolve existing problems in a number of areas, and has brought the building to the point that it can be safely and comfortably used by the town's citizens as a community center. Action items have included:

- Second Phone Line for fire alarms is installed
- North Front sill repairs including Cornice molding damage - Sill has been repaired and we are working to get the cornice repaired.
- Furnace repair and cleaning - there have been several Fire Dept. calls in past years due to poor condition of the boilers. The problems have been repaired, and users report heating is reliable.
- Ceiling tiles and carpeting - large downstairs meeting room - The frequent use of this room, and the poor condition of carpets and ceilings required sprucing up. Painting has been done and carpets and ceiling tiles are installed.
- Cellar Doors - the old large exterior cellar doors were leaky and rotting. Doors have been repaired.
- Roof has been checked and does not leak. Ice barriers - to prevent snow and ice from falling and causing injury or damage - need repair or replacement. Condition will be monitored.
- Windows are in good condition but some need recaulking. Broken glass and storm windows have been repaired. Interior sash have been closed and locked (for the first time in many years) to prevent waste.
- Cellar Cleanup - Cellar cleanup has started and is ongoing. We will keep working with the Fire Dept., DPW, EMS, Council on Aging, Historical Commission, Recreation committee, and Selectmen to determine what is important and what should be eliminated.
- Auditorium (upstairs) temporary walls have been removed, theater storage has been removed, and a remaining temporary office will be removed after the library moves out. Chairs have been inspected and repairs will be made to 8 chair units.
- Window shades have been repaired or replaced as necessary on most windows.
- Additional fire protective sensors and pull stations have been installed as required.
- Air conditioners formerly in the library have been donated and will be installed. These units have separate heat exchangers and will minimally impact building appearance.

4. Action plan for next 3 years

The stated intent of the Selectmen in forming this committee was to “study the reutilization of the old town hall, possibly including design and architectural drawings.” It is this phase into which we hope to move, having taken care of the most pressing problems. We are asking the selectmen for approval of the plan in general, recognizing that detail changes may need to be made with their approval. The process we propose to follow is outlined below:

- A. Secure a Historic Structures Report - A Historic Structures report must be done by knowledgeable professionals to establish what remains of the original building and its various modifications. This report would point the way to integrating changes made in the past with present and future uses, and maintain as much of the historic nature of the building as practical. We have an excellent chance at getting Mass Historical Commission funding for such a report. Further grant availability for planning and restoration is strongly contingent on a Historic Structures Report. We also must consider the ramifications of putting a permanent preservation restriction on this building. The Historical Commission is drawing up an application for matching funds for a Historic Structures Report.
- B. Secure Design help to upgrade the following features:
1. Handicap Access - To fully utilize the upstairs auditorium of the building, and to comply with ADA requirements for construction in excess of \$50,000, handicap access will be necessary. It is our suggestion that access be planned for all 3 floors so that the cellar can be utilized.
 2. Toilet Facilities - In order to use the Auditorium with its additional seating capacity, we will need to add toilets. Present requirements are understood to require one fixture for every 50 women and every 100 men, assuming a 50/50 mix of males and females. The present toilets will be insufficient, and we should consider whether to leave them as they are for handicapped use, or relocate all washroom facilities to the basement. The 1835 Town Hall is part of a septage plan, as its soil capacity is needed to make the expansion of the Fire Station a possibility. When a common septic system is in place, we should have more than adequate capacity for the continuation of use of the 1835 Town Hall facilities.
 3. Fire Protection - The Fire Department has strongly recommended we provide for a sprinkler system as a high priority. Looking at the experiences of towns around us, we see losses of the town halls in Barre and Petersham, as well as the recent loss of the Inn in Paxton. Wish though we may, the possibility of fire is always with us, and we need to take the threat seriously.
 4. Kitchen - Some uses would require a caterer's kitchen. We need to be able to serve refreshments and some level of food service.
 5. Front Entryway - We still have the original front doors that were in the building. An effort should be made to incorporate them into a reproduction of the original entryway. The original entry, consistent with the period, comprised a stairway on each side, both up and down. Stairway trim originally included wide pine wainscoting applied horizontally and at an angle on the stairs. The original fan that was above the portico is also still in good shape. A number of examples of these features can be seen in buildings in this area, including the church across the street which also involved John Springer, designer and builder of this 1835 Town Hall, as chair of the building committee in 1842. The suggestion has been made by several architects that we should consider working to 1835 configurations in changes we make in the 1st floor, and 1890 configurations in changes we make in the upstairs. It is not expected that the building be restored in its entirety, but that we work in the right direction.
- C. Apply for available grants, secure bids, Secure funds, and contract for work to be done.

5. Ongoing Maintenance

Long term needs of the building will include ongoing maintenance, often neglected in our public buildings. Most of the upgrades and maintenance items will be necessary regardless of the specific uses of this building. As the years unfold there will probably be needs for space that the 1835 Town Hall can accommodate without major modifications beyond the Action plan list. The most critical attribute of the building is its unique historic design and its presence as a main feature that defines the center of our town.

In view of its unique nature, we need to assure that the 1835 Town Hall is managed by a group sensitive to history, architecture, and the methods used to build and maintain an old building. For a town growing and changing rapidly it may sometimes be low on the priority list due to other pressing needs. It is suggested that a committee or trustees to oversee this structure, and possibly other historic municipal structures, be in place and staffed with people with specific interest in historic buildings. Such a committee could report to the Selectmen and/or the Historical Commission.

The Board of Selectmen's instructions to the Old Town Hall Committee in February 2001 included (item 2) a "Recommend immediate upgrade plan". This plan was to include (A) Exterior, (B) Interim use, and (C) potential articles for (Fall 2001) town meeting. Much of the required upgrade has been done with the help of article 4, November 13, 2001, that transferred a part of the original \$20,000 to use for maintenance.

Exterior paint is in rough shape and there are a few areas that need caulking and trim repair to keep the water out. We are working to get the front cornice moldings repaired. It is our suggestion that we pursue painting this Summer (2003), possibly using pre-release program help as we did in the interior.

- To provide ongoing maintenance, some source of funding will be necessary. We ask that a permanent account be established to maintain the old town hall, with revolving account provisions to collect user fees or donations. Our estimate is that approximately \$5000 annually would be needed to maintain the old town hall, and we are asking the selectmen to consider putting such an item into the warrant for the next town meeting.
- To initiate a Historic Structures Report, we ask that the Selectmen consider an article to expend \$10,000 on a Historic Structures Report contingent on the receipt of a matching grant from the Massachusetts Historical Commission and to transfer \$5000 from Article 31, May 15, 2000 town meeting, reutilization study, to cover the Town's share of the expense.

With this report we are asking the Selectmen to endorse or clarify the proposed actions of the Old Town Hall Committee as set out in Section 4 above. The committee is willing to proceed with the plan of action and seeks an acknowledgment that the Board of Selectmen support the process.

Respectfully Submitted, The Old Town Hall Committee:

Vernon Gaw

Chair

R. Gary Griffin

Cynthia A. Secord

Vice Chair

Tom Loan

Willard K. French II

Treasurer

Roland Nelson

Ron Pichierri

Plan Approved, Board of selectmen

