

June 12, 2023

To Mallory Cook, Chair, South Berwick Town Council

Dear Councilors,

We thank the town leaders for hiring a consultant to study Town Hall and what the future needs will be for our town offices. We appreciate the full and comprehensive review of the challenges of the existing town hall. At this point, many of us feel it would be important to look more fully at creative options for renovating it. We believe that with a decision this large, a second opinion is called for beyond that of Port City Architects.

Based on discussions with several experienced architects and contractors, we believe the estimate of \$10.5 million was on the extremely high end of the spectrum. Among some of the issues that led to this overly expensive estimate, the consultants

- calculated the cost of renovating a 20,000-square-foot building, which appears to double or triple count stairwell space, elevator space and structural walls.
- did not figure in the income that could be gained by renting a floor.
- did not take into account the possibility of renovating only two floors and leaving the third floor for the lessor's build-out.
- did not appear to account for site development cost for the new building option.

These are just the immediate cost issues. There are also environmental and social issues that must be considered in any comparison of building new versus renovating.

Although Andy Hyland of Port City told the Building Committee in March that “whatever we report to the town, if you disregard the intangibles, it would be a waste of all our time,” the presentation made to the council on May 23 included no mention of these intangibles.

Comparing immediate costs of renovating a structure in our historic center versus building new ignores several important factors in the decision. Once sold, this property will never belong to our town again. To believe that a developer will be constrained by covenants or other agreements is foolhardy, as has been proven by past activity in our town's historic district. Our town does not have the deep pockets nor political will to take on costly litigation against developers, as we have seen from past agreements.

The Town Hall and Central School together form the most visible town center, creating a significant green space in the village for community gathering and events. This formal town center shows the town's pride in its school system and its municipal government.

People move to and love South Berwick for its village center, thus adding to the value of property in town. The tax revenue from added property values cannot be measured but is certainly substantial.

As the town grows, as we all know it will, keeping the town hall building under town ownership would ultimately allow us space to grow into new offices. Expanding Northeast density and climate migration promises a significant expansion of South Berwick, whether we like it or not.

Putting commercial enterprises into the building will bring long-term income to the town until that space is needed for expansion. That lease revenue offsets the tax revenue if the building were sold, and

this is a formula that has been used in town halls across New England. When the municipality reinvests in its historic downtown properties, it sends a strong message to local business owners that the town is committed to the success of the village.

We believe it is critical to look more seriously at other options for renovating the existing building as part of a long-term plan for the village, not just through the lens of this moment's budget considerations.

A few of the questions that linger after the May 23 council meeting:

—We heard that the load-bearing walls cannot have holes, and yet that is often done with beams and columns, allowing more flexibility on design.

— Are there really no grants for municipalities? A quick review found at least a few. And significantly, the state legislature passed a law this month that would allow TIF money to be used for renovating municipal buildings. What better use for our downtown TIF money?!

—Could the files that are not used on a day-to-day basis be archived somewhere besides the Class A office space? A portion of the building could be renovated for storage at a lower cost per square foot.

Residents have made it clear - in the comprehensive plan survey and elsewhere - that they treasure our village, they want a walk-able center and they consider environmental issues and green space valuable. A planning decision this consequential should align with the recommendations of the comprehensive plan.

This letter was signed by people we were able to contact in just a few days' time. If we had time to gather more signatures, this list would grow quickly, we are certain. We urge you to get more information about how a renovation could work. We understand that for some, the goal is a new and modern building. For so many of us it is not, and any consultant's report must answer to us as well.

Thank you

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