

BMH and the future of Town Offices Yet Another Plan

Since the defeat of the Brewster Hall Rehabilitation warrant article at 2011 Town Meeting, I've watched the reaction of the public and town officials with interest. Now that all of the information concerning reduced scope and phasing has been provided, I'd like to try to sort this out and offer some perspectives that might not be as obvious as the brute-force approach that is being implied.

The Numbers: Here is a worksheet that I produced. We can quibble about the sq ft numbers, but I took them off the drawings and they are within a couple of percent. I've taken the liberty of numbering them for ease of reference.

Brewster Hall Renovation Cost Worksheet

	Description	Cost	Gross Sq Ft	Gross Cost/sq ft	Office Sq Ft	% Current Office
1	1 st Flr Only w/o Annex	\$1,857,162	4,700	\$395	4700	72%
2	1 st Flr Only w/Annex	\$2,000,467	6,500	\$308	4700	72%
3	1 st Flr w/Exterior	\$2,894,047	6,500	\$445	4700	72%
4	1 st & 2 nd Flrs w/Exterior	\$3,363,971	8,780	\$383	6980	107%
	Annex		1800			
	1 st Office		4700			
	2 nd Office		2280			
	Total Office		6980			
	Office Cost/sq ft		\$482			
	Current space		6500			

What jumps out at me are two facts:

- 1) Short of undertaking the most expensive \$3.4 million option, essentially Article 9 without a third floor, the office space would be 28% less than what we currently use, and substantially less than anything that has been discussed as an alternative. Essentially, the plan would fragment the town offices with a satellite office needed for the Planning and Public Works departments.
- 2) The cost/sq ft is nearly double what is considered reasonable for new office space.

Also stated was the caution that options 1 and 2 should be considered stopgap measures. The roof would not be repaired or structurally reinforced as needed, the windows on the second floor would continue to deteriorate, and the exterior brick would not be repaired and re-pointed. In short, this issue will linger as a pressing issue for the town until we do at least option 3.

The Logistics:

This project, in any form, would require moving out of BMH for 6-12 months. With options 1-3, there would be a continuing need for at least part of that off site space indefinitely.

The Politics:

When the original restoration was defeated 56%-44% the response was that it was the economy, even though at the time, the great recession was a year away. The BOS, through a THOC seeded with proponents, generated a rationale to proceed as if the signal from the public was to move forward.

Similarly, the most recent defeat has been interpreted as a victory. The argument is that if 58% of the voters agreed to it, that's what 58% of the town wants. I suggest that when presented with no alternative and a town government determined not to take no for an answer, some portion of those yes votes are out of resignation rather than approval.

There has been a groundswell of indignant reaction since the BOS began this latest effort to phase the project. My prediction is that none of these phased options would pass in the contentious climate that is brewing, especially given the tea-party small-government austerity atmosphere that will prevail in NH around that time, the obvious and angry opposition that will be presented, and the recent reaction to voter badgering exhibited in Tuftonboro.

In the TOCAG survey conducted several years ago, 59% of approximately 1,200 voters indicated that they disapprove of spending big money on BMH despite proponents mobilizing using email and a newspaper ad to rally BMH supportive responses to the survey. When given choices and a fair question, citizens seemed to be generally against this approach, a result that is reinforced by the failure of the most recent proposal despite being unopposed on the ballot, and largely without credible opposition in the public forum.

Since the outset, there seems to be a general acknowledgment that BMH should be preserved. The disagreements seem to come up when we talk about the extent of the preservation, the ultimate use of the building, and who should pay for it. The position of the Friends of Town Hall has changed little in that they demand that the ultimate purpose be as a town office and town hall and that the cost of the rehabilitation that they have largely specified be borne by the taxpayers.

We can go on for years until finally something passes that establishes the proverbial foot in the door and slowly, painfully, some or all of the original Friends' goal is achieved - or not. In the meantime, the town will be polarized and paralyzed, with little getting done toward any other major infrastructure improvements.

An Alternative:

What I am suggesting is taking another path that has a high probability of achieving the same result. It is a framework and not a plan per-se. Details would be negotiated.

- 1) Establish a trust to take possession of the building. Establish as trustees a mix of people dedicated to preservation of the building, and the spirit of this proposal.
- 2) Obtain an estimate to repair the exterior of the building and to add sprinklers and other life safety repairs. This will be around \$1.5 million.
- 3) Launch a capital campaign to save BMH and raise the money, and seek whatever historic preservation grants can be obtained.
- 4) Move employees out of BMH to leased space nearby in the Bell Building.
- 5) Some time later, when the funds have been raised and the building stabilized and outwardly restored, the trust would offer to make space available to the town for use as town offices. The town would be asked to do their own build-out, including utilities and HVAC. This could amount to up to \$1 million investment. The town would be offered a long term lease, with appropriate releases to comply with the law. The town would then pay rent at the prevailing commercial rate. The trust would be responsible for maintenance of the building shell and grounds, using the rent money as an operating budget.
- 6) Alternatively, the trust could borrow the money to build out the town's space and bill the expense back to the town over a fixed period. This would allow the town to absorb the investment without bonding. I think five years may be the statutory limit for this type of arrangement with a NH municipality.
- 7) Once the immediate goal is satisfied, the trust would be free to pursue development of other space for community, commercial, or charitable purposes, or to further develop municipal space using the same framework established for the first floor offices.

This sounds complicated, and it would take time to achieve the desired result, but note that we are already more than five years into a dead-end, diluted strategy and little has been accomplished. What I am proposing will remove a lot of the obstacles in the way of both repairing the building and insuring that it is taken care of by generations to come.

The down-side is that as much as \$1.5 million will need to be raised through a charitable capital campaign. The trust would be free to try to secure grants for historic preservation and may well have more success than the town would have. The bottom line is that if the building isn't worth \$1.5 million to the community, they shouldn't be coerced into accepting a \$3-\$4 million debt for the same ultimate purpose. The effort could be divided into separate efforts to fix the roof, replace windows (great opportunity for named donations) and re-pointing of the brick (again, great opportunity for named donations)

The upside is that employees and town-business moves right away, and that the way forward is clear and does not need to involve bonding.

The net result over time could by all outward appearances look very much like what has been tried and failed through the brute force method.

This could be initiated immediately, with referendums on establishing a trust and moving employees to semi-permanent space in the Bell Building. There is little risk of citizens losing interest as the message will be focused and positive to fix the building, moving at whatever speed the trust can manage on their own timetable. When the time comes to decide whether to move back to BMH, the decision will not be an overwhelmingly financial one, and can be driven by a simple majority. Voters will feel that they are being heard and I think that the response would be overwhelming support for a fresh new approach.

Compromise is a difficult thing to recognize. Often it is assumed to mean that two parties magically stumble upon a solution that is mutually agreeable and everyone is pleased with the result. That actually is called fantasy. A better definition might be that it is an agreement that both parties reluctantly agree to because they recognize that it is the only way to get what they want done. A good compromise has the appearance of giving both parties more than half of what they want. I think by that measure, this would be a good compromise.

In years past I have participated in the annual move of goods from the Huggins Fair barns to the fairgrounds at Brewster Field. That day is magical. When I consider the relatively small contribution that the fair now makes when compared to the needs of a 21st century hospital, I can't help but wonder if it's all worth it. But seeing the community come together in such great numbers to make it happen is the real value of the event, and embodies small-town values. That's my vision when I see the potential for this project as a community effort rather than a political battle. I see a result that instills pride in everyone rather than a symbol of either a battle won or a battle lost.

Should this approach, in whole or part, be something that the Selectmen are interested in developing, I am available to do so at a work session or individually.

Respectfully,

Bob Lemaire