The Town Hall Preservation Committee
2:00PM on Thursday, April 23rd
Hooksett's Municipal Offices at 35 Main Street
Remote Meeting
Minutes

Membership: James Sullivan, Chair
Also in attendance: Clark Karolian, Alternate; Andre Garron, Town Administrator; Matt Lavoie, Code Enforcement officer; Earl Labonte, Public Works Director; Bruce Thomas, Town Engineer; Nick Germain, Project Coordinator

Please note due to the Governor's COVID-19 Emergency Order, this meeting was conducted remotely via the Zoom platform.

General Business Discussed

James Sullivan commenced meeting at approximately 2:07PM and ceded discussion to staff.

I. State of the Building

Leak in the Main Hall ceiling

Project Coordinator announced that a small leak had apparently been discovered in the Main Hall the week before as a result of an abnormally high wind and rain storm. Earl Labonte, Public Works Director, described that after the previous week's storm, during a routine inspection, DPW personnel discovered a large puddle on the unfinished floor of the hall towards the rear of the building. In a smaller rainstorm prior to the current THPC meeting, DPW personnel confirmed the leak appeared to only come into effect in very high wind situations. Project Coordinator confirmed leak appeared to not be present during severe rain conditions later in the week. James Sullivan asked how this could be remediated. Public Works staff will check above the tin ceiling today or tomorrow to see where the leak appeared to be coming from. Mr. Labonte speculated it might be from a metal vent/eye being shifted by the heavy winds, and that likely simple sealant or caulking could fix the issue in the near term. Matt Lavoie, Code Enforcement Officer, offered to go up with DPW staff above the ceiling to check with DPW staff. Councilor Sullivan supported this effort, and asked if this would be acceptable under the restrictions until July 1st. Mr. Labonte noted this would be fine as it could be construed as basic essential maintenance. DPW and Administration staff will continue to monitor after checking and implementing any emergency measures such as minor weatherizing.

Administrative Updates

Project Coordinator then describing some of the Administrative events that had occurred since the last major meeting of the Committee. A yearly monitoring report on the property was filed with LCHIP on time and met with acceptance and no negative comments. Administration has also been in periodic contact with the
State Division of Historic Resource about the Moose plate Grant for the Singing Gallery Project. Staff still can’t spend money on the building in any non-emergency or basic maintenance capacity until July 1st. Other than the main hall leak, and minor pin dot holes that don’t appear to be leaking significantly in the addition, Project Coordinator described the building as in good shape, and that it had remained visibly unchanged.

II. Signing Gallery Restoration

On Going out to Bid this Spring

Transitioning to pressing business, the Project Coordinator stated that it might be beneficial to discuss putting out to bid for the Grant-funded Singing Project. Council had accepted the grant, but the Town Hall Preservation Committee and cumulative staff input was being sought before commencing. Project Coordinator briefly summarized that the grant was obtained to restore the damaged Singing Gallery in the main hall that dates from 1839.

Although the building had been admirably renovated continuously to support each new generation of Hooksett residents’ use, said renovations had heavily damaged historic features such as the singing gallery. The gallery itself had been converted into the second floor Town Administrator’s office when the building served as the main municipal offices previously. This particular feature was covered up, had portions removed, and endured heavy damage.

A $9700 grant sought and won by the previous Town hall Preservation Committee Chair, Kathie Northrup, was expected to cover the entire cost. It would go towards historically replicating and restoring the gallery, aided significantly by remaining historic material to build off of and copy. It would include millwork, wood work, plastering, and painting. Councilors Koralian and Sullivan supported going out to bid and getting an extension as needed.

On the Need for Corresponding Work & Budget Discussions

Project Coordinator then suggested that there was a critical issue that needed to be settled before going out to bid: Since covering up a large hole (the old doorway to the town administrator’s office) was part of the work, unless a new access point was added, the space above the tin ceiling would be inaccessible from inside the building. Mr. Lavoie reiterated this point, and suggested some kind of access was mandatory, either a ladder access in one of the anticipated street facing bathrooms or some kind of false access door built into the gallery. He noted this was also especially critical as some building visions foresee the space used for storage of building mechanics such as HVAC.

Councilor Sullivan asked what the requirements would be. Mr. Lavoie responded that the ladder would have to be able to bear a fully equipped firefighter ascending. Project Coordinator asked for input as to how staff should proceed.

A discussion about budget dynamics related to old town hall ensued. July 1st was reiterated as the start of a new fiscal year and when money could be spent again. There was a considerable amount to spend starting in the next fiscal year: $20,000. This could be used to perform the extra work to enable the grant project. Officials present were supportive of going forward.

Approach to Handling Building Policy in 2020 and Beyond

The examination of budget issues transitioned to talks about policymaking for the building. The recent history of the building was summarized. Currently, staff have official contractor estimates for fully “finishing” the building at projects amounting to $600,000 to $800,000, with the original plan of getting the building open to public use and a certificate of occupancy at a basic level at around $250,000. The previous
handling of the building had essentially been spending relatively small amounts here or there, but the challenge is that essential individual projects to get the building available to public use are substantial: $30,000 to $85,000 individually.

Andre Garron, Town Administrator, suggested that it was likely time to re-discuss policymaking for the building at the Town Council level: Consensus needed to be reached on how to fund the building for its original purpose or at least get it to a point where ownership transfer was feasible.

Councilor Sullivan reiterated the plan for the building when it was first decommissioned as Hooksett’s municipal offices: A historical restoration with an eye on public use as an event hall. He also noted that idea of selling the building back then met with strong opposition, and that the presence of the Historical Society’s building and collections on the same property would complicate future uses if they weren’t compatible with preservation. He agreed Council would have to convene and make careful decisions in the future.

Councilor Karolian asked how much of actual tax payer money had been spent on the building versus grants. Mr. Lavoie responded that the town’s actual cash amount was likely in the tens of thousands of dollars. DPW work crews had also periodically done the actual work for projects such as the main hall demolition and disposal. Councilor Karolian also asked about the property’s current assessed value and what it would be worth if the building was restored: He noted his most pressing concern was that the town didn’t put more in than it would get back on its use and go negative. Staff didn’t have the exact assessed value on hand, but the entire property currently and in the future with different options would be difficult to assess. There were fundamental code issues that prevented its continued use by the public even before the town started any restoration work, and now it stands as essentially a construction zone in stasis. Even, say, total demolition costs would be burdensome and make the end net value negative for most uses unattractive. Councilor Karolian expressed interest in having this information available for when the property gets discussed in the future, and emphasized financial responsibility with whatever decision gets made.

Conclusion

- Staff will go out to bid for the Gallery Restoration Projects (including the ladder access)
- Begin getting information together for discussion policymaking in Council going forward
- Continue maintaining the building in accordance with the ongoing Stewardship Agreement in effect

Submitted with respect,

Nick Germain, Project Coordinator
4/29/2020