

**Minutes of Bethel
Town Hall Finance
Committee
June 26, 2008**



**At Bethel Public
Library at 7 p.m.**

Present were committee members Chris Masters, Janet Burnham, Rick Benson and Winslow Ayer. Also present were Geneva Gaiko, Davis Dimock, Victoria Weber, Mary Pavone, Joe De Freitas, Peg Trombly, Mary Demar, Michael Mills and Jason Lewis.



Before the meeting officially began, everyone gathered at the Town Hall for a brief tour to show it to the people who were unfamiliar with the building.

- 1- At about 7:20 Janet Burnham called the meeting to order at the Library. Amy Bergamo is out of town.
- 2- The committee members present accepted the minutes of the May 29th meeting as printed.

3- Janet announced that **400 donations have been made to the '1892 Fund', totaling over \$42,000.** This does not include about \$600 that Bethel Rotary made on their Chicken BBQ on June 7th or money that was raised at a Council of the Arts concert last night at the bandshell where a hat was passed for donations for the Hall.

[Janet did not mention that she has created a sandwich board type sign in the shape of the hall tower which is now positioned in front of the Hall. It has two 'thermometer' type scales reaching up to the tower, one for # of donations, and the other for the amount of money raised so far. This augments the signs in the window which, since the 1892 Campaign began last fall, has posted the total # of donations.]

4- Royalton Academy Building

Peg Trombly and Mary Demar were our guests to tell us about the Academy Building in Royalton which is similar to our hall in a number of ways. We especially wanted to learn what is involved in making a community building sustainable financially, and what is involved in running such a building.

Peg was the Administrative Assistant for the Town of Royalton for 13 years, including while the Academy Building renovation project was going on. She currently is a selectperson and works in the financial offices at Vermont Law School. Mary Demar has worked in the building trades for years. She has been the Academy Building manager since November 2007.

The renovation of the Academy Building (hereafter AB) took place in the early 1990's and much of the funding came through Vermont Community Development Program grants (which also paid for

our Hall biddable specs and our municipal parking lot). From the start Royalton was fortunate to have two groups who were active and involved:

The **Civic Club** historically had overseen the building and knew the building needed work. At the same time the **Senior Center** (which had been using the United Church space in South Royalton village) needed more space and wanted to provide programs after its meals. Each of these groups had budgets and could afford to pay rent and they helped identify uses and needs and to raise funds. The intention from the outset was for the building to be self sustaining. (It is unclear whether taxes were covering maintenance before this time as they currently are in Bethel where \$7,170 was spent last year.)

The third group that became involved was the **Royalton school** which rented a large space upstairs for a federal-and-state funded EEI pre-school program.

The **town Recreation Committee and the Planning Commission** also needed space, so they build into their budgets rental fees for offices and programs – things like line dancing, Easter and Christmas parties and arts and crafts programs. Recently these two groups moved to the old grange hall across from the town offices, freeing up office space in the AB.

Building description. The Academy Building has individual offices and the large pre-school room at the back on the upper floor, as well as storage rooms. On the ground-level floor there is a large kitchen, one office and the hall, which can seat up to 120, but is smaller than the Bethel hall. It does not have a tall ceiling, has a very small, only slightly raised stage, and overall has a more intimate quality, with curtains and pictures on the wall. At the back of the ground level is a handicapped access leading directly to the parking lot (about 35 spaces, and actually owned by the church next door). There is also a lift to the upper floor and storage rooms at the back.

Several offices are rented out to groups like the regional Council on Aging and the White River Partnership. As a specific example, the Partnership has a pleasant upstairs front office with windows to the south and west. They pay \$300 per month which includes utilities (but not phone or internet access) and one days' use of the AB hall each year. This rate is similar to what they were paying at their former location in the National Forest building in Hancock.

So there is the pre-school and at least 4 offices rented out. The seniors use the building during the day on Tuesdays and Thursdays for meals and entertainment. The Civic Club's weekly fundraising bingo takes place Tuesday nights and Weight Watchers meets every Thursday evening. All other times are available for private or individual/incidental rentals. **The budget for 2008 shows expected income of \$17,000 from the on-going rentals and \$5,000 from private incidental rentals.**

This money is spent as follows:

Wages	\$7,500
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Supplies	800
Insurance, town portion	1,200
Electricity	3,700 (but should go down due to installation of new light bulbs)
Heat	4,200

(Peg did not share all the budget lines – we hope to get a copy of her spreadsheet.)

Rental Fees

The idea is that this is a town building and they want to meet the needs of residents. Fees were recently raised to \$15 per hour for a minimum of \$30 or \$200 for 24 hours. Plus there is a \$50 deposit against damage or failure to clean up adequately.

Advertising used to be once-a-year in the newspaper, but is no longer needed as people know about the building and call to rent it. Generally it is felt that as soon as some people begin using our building, others users will learn of it and uses will grow quite fast.

Rental Procedures

Mary Demar spends most of her time on the phone setting up rentals. Once someone contacts her and books the hall, she takes them a key and mails them two copies of a contract. It states exactly what they need to do to clean up so they get their deposit check back. The rental party mails back one signed contract plus a check for the rental fee and a second check for the \$50 deposit.

When the party is done with their event, they mop the floors, clean the rest rooms and the kitchen, etc., as specified in the contract. They leave the key in a drop-off box. Mary then comes and inspects and assuming all is clean, she mails back the deposit check. Since she began 7 months ago only one group did not clean up adequately and did not receive their deposit back!

The building was recently re-keyed. All keys cannot be duplicated. There are only a few master keys – which are held by the fire department, the plumbing person, Mary Demar, the town Administrative Assistant and one senior advocate person. Keys which are issued to office renters or incidental party renters open the main doors, the space they rent and bathrooms.

Maintenance

There is a \$15/hour cleaning woman who comes on Friday mornings for about 2 hours. Mary goes to the building at that time too and checks it over and attends to anything that needs attention. Since she has begun she has cleaned the building top to bottom, repaired many little things, and installed energy-saving light bulbs. For items costing more than \$150 she makes brief appearances at the Select board meetings. Mary is a town employee.

Insurance

Currently the AB is covered under Royalton's passive insurance with the Vermont League of Cities and Towns. The Rec committee and the Planners, as town boards, have their activities included under town insurance. Although the Town has queried the League several times, and been told they are covered, Peg worries that at some point they may want to require private parties to have their own insurance. When she is scheduling use, Mary verbally discourages alcohol and tells parties that 'they are liable', but Peg thinks it is time to check with the League again, especially about a scheduled wedding that plans to have an open bar.

Oversight Board

Recently the oversight of the AB returned to the Select board, but for many years it was carried out by an Academy Building Oversight Board made up of representatives of the main users and Town officials. Peg and Mary suggest that Bethel explores such a board. Each group recommended a representative and suggested that person to the Select board who approved them. This freed the Select board from regular involvement in the details of running the building. The Royalton board was made up of representatives from the Seniors, the school, the select board, the town government, the planners, the Civic Club, Weight Watchers. The overall tasks of the Board were to get out /identify needs, fundraising and oversight. They met once a month.

Now Mary Demar is the building manager and reports to the Select board who are responsible for oversight.

Uses of the Royalton Academy Building

Many fundraising events, such as twice-a-year church steeple fundraisers of strawberry shortcake suppers, and yard sales take place in the AB. Other uses include dinners, book sales, arts and crafts sales, food sales, family anniversary and birthday parties, weddings, dances, LifeLine 1-2x per year, and a number of other statewide groups.

Advice for Bethel

Peg and Mary offered the following advice to us:

- Our space is beautiful, with the high coffered ceiling and excellent acoustics. We will inevitably have more performances than the AB.
- Consider 'condo-izing' the building by 'selling' parts of it to certain groups.
- Do look into VCDP grants again. Even though conditions have changed for VCDP, and we were told in about 2005 that they definitely do not do community centers, we should investigate again to see what the current situation is. Perhaps they would fund some aspect of our hall.
- The kitchen at the AB is a big draw. 95% of the users do use the kitchen. Most use it for warming and serving food they have brought, although 20% have food catered, using the kitchen. We do not need as extensive a kitchen as they have (they have a 10-burner gas stove which cooks the senior lunches too), but should have a triple sink for washing dishes, a separate hand-washing sink, counters, refrigerators.
- The other aspects that Mary believes are key are ample parking and easy handicapped accessibility, because more people are handicapped all the time.
- Investigate whether there are recreation needs in Bethel that are not being met, such as dances of all sorts for all ages, yoga, exercise classes, martial arts, variety shows, music things, plays, performances of all types, other uses by the school.
- We should contact Scott Paulson of the Seven Star Center in Sharon and ask if there is a local need for performance space that is not being met.
- Overall, identify needs and uses; there needs to be a strong demand demonstrated and then that can be sold to the taxpayers.

5- Michael Mills, Preservation Architect and Planner

- Michael graduated from Whitcomb 20 years ago, and is back in town for his reunion and to speak at this year's Whitcomb Alumni Banquet. He is interested in preserving the historical legacy of our town and has challenged the Whitcomb Alumni to create a database of every Whitcomb graduate. He came to our meeting directly from another meeting with Peter Nikolaidis, Jason Lewis and others on the logistics of doing that.
- Michael worked as a preservation architect and planner in the Washington DC area for 13 years and now has his own firm, Mills Group - Architecture, Planning Preservation, in the university town of Morgantown, West Virginia.
- See his web site at www.millsgroup.biz for information on him, his projects and a great Resources section. The Preservation segment includes detailed US General Services Administration (GSA) **Historic Preservation Technical Procedures** including [Preventive Maintenance Procedures](#) for routine and cyclic maintenance activities, [Standards](#) containing background references and support data, [Repair Procedures](#) for the correction of material deterioration and failure as well as [Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings](#).

Michael told the group that even historic buildings need to be used. They need to live and breathe and be sustainable, not just monuments. The Town Hall needs to operate as a business. That takes money, it takes people and it takes a plan. So we need to get a good **Business Plan** together and to figure what it will take to keep the building going. We should have a **market study** that identifies what similar buildings – like the White Church, the school and the Academy Building – do and what the Hall can do that those buildings cannot do. For example programmatically the

Academy Building is a different animal. Our hall is more performance-based. Having these specific things will sell the project to the community. They want you to run it like a business. They want to invest in something that won't fail – the plan assures them of that.

The **Market Study should also** document 'circles of influence'. That is, economic spin-off influences on the rest of Bethel that this building functioning and bringing in – say – 20 events with 100 people each – will cause. There are additive, cumulative benefits to other businesses – a ripple effect – that can add up to be big. Can UVM or VTC help with such a study?

Advertising of events is important. Consider a marquee to announce shows. How we present the building and its events is key to ongoing success. It needs to be aesthetic, distinctive and effective. Another thing to think about is how does the building present itself when there are no events taking place? Could there be a display about the Peavine Railroad? Could the Historical Society use it as an adjunct to their difficult-to-access museum space above the Brick Church? Could there be other on-going exhibits?

Winslow explained that at the **June 9th Selectboard meeting** which Janet, Amy, Mary Floyd, Geneva, Winslow, Davis and Victoria attended, the board suggested bonding for the full amount, not just the \$600,000 the Committee had recommended at our last meeting. The board gave their support and commitment for going for the whole amount and getting the project done and the building in use as soon as possible, with work ideally beginning this coming winter. At that meeting the select ++++++board said "The Board wants to go forward enough to complete it. We can pay back the bond early and reduce the interest if we receive more money. "

Michael has a lot of experience in downtown planning and he emphasized that the re-use of the Town Hall is an important element in the **economic re-development of downtown**. The plans he helped create for the 'Wall-to-the-Hall' Committee on Downtown in 1993 acknowledged this, ended with the Hall, and we have achieved many of the things they prioritized. The people need to look at the Hall as an investment in the future. It is about sustaining the re-development of downtown.

Importance of *Save America's Treasures*

Michael feels that when thinking about **funding** we should include energy audits and weather proofing. Having a rental office with a tenant who is onsite and has their eyes on the building is an important factor in our success. He also said it would be a terrible loss to lose the \$301,000 Save American's Treasures matching grant. Michael also told how prestigious the Save America's Treasures grants are. Ours is one of 2 in Vermont this year, and one of 40 nationally. These are **nationally significant buildings**. We should make more of the achievement of receiving this grant and the importance of our Hall.

This generated a discussion on why it is that the Hall seems to be invisible to many people. Rick offered that it is a 'background' building and is invisible because it has been unused for so long – people just don't see it any longer. One way to change that perception is to get the perspective of other people coming through town. It is the first thing they see since the hall is located at the most important intersection in town. What do they see?

Joe suggested we light the building up to help it get people's attention again. Joe encouraged the group to go forward and be positive. He assured us the bond vote will go through. This was a welcome thought to folks who have worked on the project for many years.

Rick suggested that as part of bringing the Hall to the people's attention before the bond vote, we distribute the Prospectus more widely now.

Other Business

6- Victoria recounted a conversation with Royalton's **John Dumville** who was enthusiastic about our Hall and thinks it will not conflict with the Academy Building. John said that our Hall is "an amazing building, a remarkable building that has great potential in the community and more broadly. It is not a Chandler and it should not be." He said he wishes it were in his town, and if it were he would "fight like hell to get it renovated".

7- Victoria conveyed a message from Mary Floyd that she has decided **not to hold a silent auction** this fall. She wants to have an event to kick it off in the hall and since that is not possible now, and since an auction takes a lot of planning, she thinks we should focus on getting the bond vote passed.

8- Dell Cloud has given permission to **post information about the hall renovation on the door** of the Hall. Since the garage doors are metal we may need to mount a bulletin board of some sort on the right-hand door.

9- The walk-through by architect Laz Scangas and his engineer to identify any further deterioration that might affect cost of the project is being scheduled for July.

10- At the June 9th meeting the Selectboard and Town Manager said they want to combine a bond vote for the Hall with one for work that was done on roads after the flooding last summer. Whether the sums will be combined into one or 2 questions is not yet decided, but people at this meeting feel it should not be two questions.

11- The committee members and citizens thanked our 3 guests for all the information and ideas they had shared tonight.

The meeting adjourned at 9:15.

Notes respectfully submitted by Victoria Weber ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ July 1, 2008