

**TOWN OF FRANCONIA
BOARD OF SELECTMEN
PROPOSED WELCOME CENTER PUBLIC HEARING
JULY 26, 2021 AT 5PM AT LAFAYETTE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

Members Present: Jill Brewer, Eric Meth, Dan Walker

Others Present: Kim Cowles, Jenny Monahan, members of the public

The hearing was called to order at 5:34pm.

Town Administrator Cowles presented a slide show that showed the plans for the proposed Welcome Center, which would have two public bathrooms, an office for the Chamber of Commerce, a warming area and a storage area. The presentation also showed the letter from the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation (NHCF) notifying the town of the donation. She said that the current building was moved there from the highway garage almost fifty years ago.

Town Administrator Cowles said the tentative plan is to remove the existing warming hut and information building this fall and construct a new energy efficient, aesthetic building with ADA public restrooms and increased parking spaces for the restrooms, town hall and the library. She said potential projects for spring 2022 are to relocate the utility pole that is next to the library handicap ramp, rework the library handicap ramp to make it ADA compliant, pave town hall's parking lot and re-landscape after. She said the building would include roof mounted solar panels that would supply power for the building. The goal is to publish the Request for Proposal (RFP) within a week. The town has a total of \$350,000 for the project, with \$100,000 coming from the warrant article approved by voters and \$250,000 coming from an anonymous donation. After the presentation, the following topics were discussed:

- Will a general contractor be in charge of the project? Town Administrator Cowles said yes, and the items she has listed will be expected to be part of the proposal from the contractor.
- Is the paving of the parking lot and other work planned for spring 2022 to come out of the available funding? Town Administrator Cowles said no, those funds would need to be raised.
- Have the higher construction and material costs due to the pandemic been considered? Town Administrator Cowles said that costs are normalizing somewhat but will likely never return to pre-pandemic levels. She said availability of contractors is an issue due to the building boom and waiting another year to start could see further cost increases.
- A resident asked if the presented plan was the only plan that has been developed. Town Administrator Cowles said the plan has been modified a few times but has generally stayed the same.
- A resident asked for more detail on the increased parking plan. Town Administrator Cowles said there would be parking on the side of the driveway that goes up to the building. This would create 7-10 additional parking spaces.

- The water main would need to be moved. The materials and labor would be paid for by the Water Department out of their budget. Either the town crew or the contractor would dig the trench. The new water main would go behind the building, along the bottom of the bank that goes down from the highway. Water Commissioner Kevin Johnson said it is not a complicated project and will likely cost under \$5,000.
- Town Administrator Cowles said the town is under no obligation to accept a bid that is unfavorable and if a favorable bid is not received the project could be delayed and a new RFP published.
- A committee has met to discuss the project. Committee members are Town Administrator Cowles, Selectman Walker, Jim Fitzpatrick, Jayne O'Connor, Kevin Johnson, Chip Stohl, Ann Steurnagel and Trevor Presby and additional input has been received from other residents. There are minutes of the meetings but they are not yet available on the website.
- A resident asked about the language in the letter from the NHCF which states "The donor will formally recommend the grant and will process payment when you have notified us that the project has sufficient funding to complete it and is shovel ready." Town Administrator Cowles said the town does not yet have possession of the donated funds but as soon as we have a contract and a total price for the project the funds would be released to the town. The resident said she would like that to be put in writing. Selectman Meth said he spoke with Linda Gray at the NHCF and she said that as long as the language is adhered to for the purpose it is intended for, the donation will be authorized.
- A resident posed that the vote at the 2021 Town Meeting that voted against the warrant article could be interpreted in two ways; the town voting down the project or voting down the funding and asked if counsel has been consulted. Town Administrator Cowles said counsel had been consulted and said that voters approving funding in 2019 was approving the project and the town could move forward if it had the money needed. The 2021 vote did not disapprove of the project itself, just the additional funding. Selectman Walker said the first step is to put out the RFP so the town has an idea of costs.
- In regard to the work proposed for 2022 (landscaping, moving the utility pole, paving the parking lot), should the town be getting pricing now so a warrant article can be drafted? Town Administrator Cowles said that was currently in process.
- A resident asked if moving the building back as shown on the plans would prevent visitors from seeing the building from the road and visiting it. Town Administrator Cowles said the building would be visible from the street and signage would direct visitors to it.
- A resident asked about the proposed floor plan having 53% of the building as storage area. Town Administrator Cowles said increasing the office space has been discussed.
- It was discussed that the Chamber of Commerce would pay rent to the town for the office space and the amount will be determined by the size of the space. This will help offset the buildings operating expenses, as well.
- There was a brief discussion about the placement of the solar panels and snow melt. Selectman Walker said this was discussed by the committee and the design takes snow melt into account.

- A resident asked about the project being referred to as a “renovation” in the letter from the NHCF. Selectman Meth said he had mentioned that to Linda Gray and did not feel that was of concern to them. Chairman Brewer said the town could always ask for an amended letter.
- There was a discussion about rerouting the water line and how long customers might be affected. Water Commissioner Johnson said it would just be a few hours.
- A resident asked if it is required that the town seeks a Performance Bond for the project. Town Administrator Cowles said she is waiting to hear back on that from Building Official Allan Clark.
- A resident asked about the Diamond Plate in the plan for the bathrooms. Selectman Walker said it would be similar to what is in the new Franconia Market & Deli bathrooms and is intended to reduce maintenance.
- A resident asked about the new building being close to the property line. Town Administrator Cowles said the town may need to seek a variance from the ZBA for the reduced setback.
- A resident asked how much energy the solar panels would generate, how much they would cost and whether a professional solar company would be sought. Town Administrator Cowles said yes, a professional company would be used. James Fitzpatrick said he has a number of calls out and is working on getting more information so those questions can be answered.

192 Main Street Discussion

The board sought resident’s opinions on what may be good uses for the 1.12 acre town owned property at 192 Main Street, formerly the site of the Evergreen Apartments. It was suggested to keep it as green space, use it for a pop-up market or elderly/affordable housing (which was deemed unlikely due to septic load issues and the proximity to the river).

Additional Discussion About Welcome Center

There was next a brief discussion about whether the town needs to vote again to be able to move forward with the Welcome Center. Town Administrator Cowles said town counsel had said that was not necessary due to the previous approval of the \$100,000 warrant article. Dawn Steele suggested the town have the lawyer put that advice in writing so it can be clear to residents. Kevin Johnson said that not moving forward is declining the \$250,000 donation that could be used to replace a failing building. He also said the NHCF is a reliable organization that has been in existence for decades.

There followed a discussion about the committee and the meetings that have been held thus far. Virginia Mike said that she felt the committee’s meetings were not made available to the public. Selectman Walker said the term “committee” wasn’t an accurate representation and the gatherings were for information gathering and consultation with stakeholders and people that could assist with the preliminary plans. Virginia Mike said she doesn’t feel there is enough time for public input before the project will be put out to bid. Town Administrator Cowles invited those that wish to give more input to email her or make an agenda appointment with the selectmen.

Mike Betley said the town should have an engineer or architect to work with the general contractor. Town Administrator Cowles said she has recently reached out to engineers.

Another resident commented that she hopes additional space will be planned for easy handicap access and mobility in all areas of the building that the public will be using.

Larry Plate made some suggestions about the proposed materials and adding more detail to the RFP. Town Administrator Cowles asked him to email her his suggestions.

A resident suggested another meeting before the RFP is published for residents to review the suggested changes to the plan and finalize the proposal. After this discussion, the board scheduled another public hearing for Monday August 2nd at 5:30pm at town hall.

With no further discussion, the hearing was adjourned at 7:02pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Jenny Monahan
Administrative Secretary