

Annual Cost Is What Counts For Public Safety Building

As the chair of the Stowe Public Safety Facilities Committee, I would like to provide the voters of our community all the information necessary for their consideration of the bond vote to replace these aging buildings. I also want to ask you to become informed about the cost. I speak to it in more depth in the final paragraphs, but it is important that you consider this vote in light of the true annual cost, not the total cost.

Recent articles make it sound like we need to pay \$7 million in one year. The average annual cost is 2.62 cents per \$100 in assessed property value over a 20-year life of the bond. In the most expensive year, that means the cost would be about \$32.37 per \$100,000 of value. If your house is assessed at \$500,000, your annual cost in the most expensive year would be about \$161.85. The bonding costs reduces every year after the second year, with the average being about \$22.15 per year per \$100,000 of assessed value, or about \$110.78 average per year for a home assessed at \$500,000. When the select board announced it was appointing a committee of local voters to assist in information-seeking as to why previous votes had failed and what should be done, I decided to get involved. I had been on previous committees looking at the buildings in the 1970s and 1980s and in fact had chaired the committee that prepared the original vote in 1987 for building a 50-year building at the location of the current fire station.

I went into this process thinking that Stowe would be best served moving all public-safety agencies to a new, modern facility on the Mayo Farm. I was pleasantly surprised at the first meeting of the committee when a straw vote was conducted, and five out of six had the same goal. The sixth was not opposed, but not committed to the Mayo Farm. The other five are Les Goldberg, vice chair; Helen Beckerhoff, Barbara Pfitzenmayer, Lynn Baumrind and Ed Griffiths.

Given that position, we started gathering information. We read all previous reports about these buildings, including the 2001 feasibility study done by Cushman & Beckstrom, the 2003 feasibility study conducted by the 2003 Public Safety Committee chaired by Peter Beck, and the 2006 feasibility study done by E.H. Danson. We also read in depth the Mayo Farm management plan, Mayo Farm land development approval process, and the Mayo Farm homestead zone management plan. We conducted a tour of both buildings, the police station and the fire/rescue station. We were appalled by the conditions observed — lack of space, cracks in walls, apparent structural problems, and general deterioration of the buildings.

While reading the previous feasibility studies, we were struck with a common theme in each. Below are three comments, one from each of the studies:

- There is little debate that the current facilities, which include the fire-rescue building and the police station, are at and possibly beyond their capacity. (Beck committee, 2003.)
- Space needs, at this time, are insufficient and by 2011 both of the buildings will need to be expanded. (Cushman report, 2001.)
- The buildings are no longer sufficient for the needs of the current operations, never mind the future. (Danson study, 2006.)

I had the benefit of knowing that, in the budget submission of the police department in November 1991, I — as the police chief at that time — requested funding and a plan to begin to improve the police station, which was already having space and maintenance problems. Nothing was ever done at that time, and apparently has never been done since. The committee came to the conclusion that the status quo is not acceptable and that something has to be done immediately; that to wait will create a number of problems, including a continued decline in the number of volunteers in the fire, rescue and mountain rescue agencies due to unpleasant working conditions, potential for major

structural problems which will have to be fixed, in a Band-Aid approach, until we finally have a long-range solution and an increase in construction cost that has been estimated to be about 10 to 15 percent per year for this type of construction, and potentially a higher increase of cost given the cost of oil, which is involved in the production of so much of the raw materials for the construction of public buildings.

We then researched the process that would be required to bring this project to completion on the Mayo Farm. We are convinced that, given all the conservation issues, it would be not less than five years before construction could begin. The extra cost would be a huge waste and it is not fair to the volunteers who provide such a significant service to Stowe and to the visitors to our community to wait that long.

Finally, we revisited the plans that were defeated in 2006. We looked at them with the idea of redesign, cutting back and/or doing something different. We found that the plans were well thought out. We were convinced by the staff of E.H. Danson that the 2005 select board had carefully watched over the plan development to make sure it was bare-bones, but with proper design to allow it to fit our needs for the next 25 to 30 years. Given the constraints of the building lot, and parking needs, this design made the most sense for that site.

The committee at this point voted to support returning this project to the voters, but with a plan to educate the voters to the extreme cost of waiting. We also recommended that the select board consider funding options that would ease the burden on property taxes, such as using \$250,000 each year from the local option taxes.

In conclusion, we want to make sure the voters know that all the news articles keep beating on the cost of the total project. This is a disservice to the voters, as this is a bond issue spread over 20 years. The cost to the voters is about an annual increase of 2.62 cents per \$100 of assessed value on your tax rate. Any increase is troubling in the current climate, but bonding will keep it to a minimum. The 2.62 cents assumes that the entire cost is on the property tax.

If you want more information or are willing to host a neighborhood informational meeting, please contact Town Manager Charles Safford at 253-7350 or me at 253-8484 or Ken@StoweRealty.com.