

Town Hall Building Committee Frequently Asked Questions

Cohasset's town hall requires significant repairs and updates, as detailed below. At town meeting on May 24th, voters will be asked to vote for funds to continue planning for a renovation the old town hall and rebuilding the annex to its right, a project advocated by Cohasset's Town Hall Building Committee, Select Board, Advisory Board and Capital Budget Committee. This will allow for a more attractive, functional and flexible addition while renovating the historic structure that anchors the Town Common. Below are answers to frequently asked questions about the project.

- **What is the charge of the Town Hall Building Committee (THBC)?**

In early 2019, the Select Board charged a repopulated THBC with looking once again at formulating a plan to make the town's offices meet the current and future needs of the town. They asked for a safe, functional, flexible and accessible building in its current location and asked that the historic structure, including the auditorium, be restored as a center of civic activities. They also asked that this be accomplished within the 10-year capital plan of the town, that is, without raising taxes.

- **What is wrong with the existing Town Hall? Why now?**

It has long been known that the town hall building is in need of attention. The first study examined the conditions of the original building in 2008, but the financial crisis nixed that project. Another committee looked at the entire building in 2014 and determined that, because of poor construction, the 1980s annex was actually in worse shape than the 1857 structure. Another group confirmed this in 2018. The time is now to fix the problems, which include:

- Outdated, inefficient plumbing, electric, HVAC and fire suppression systems all at the end of their useful lives.
- Rotting wood and peeling paint left by water damage due to poor construction, and an old roof that needs to be replaced.
- Inaccessible entrances that do not meet ADA standards.
- Inadequate office, meeting room and bathroom space that do not meet the needs of both the employees and volunteer boards that comprise town government.

- **What happened to the Town Hall project in 2018, and why do we have yet another THBC?**

At Annual Town Meeting (ATM) in spring 2018, the residents recognized the need to address these shortcomings. Approximately 75% of ATM attendees voted in favor of that building committee's plan for a restoration of old town hall and the construction of a new annex. However, that plan depended on financing with "excluded" debt, that is, debt whose cost would be outside the operating budget for purposes of Prop 2-1/2. In order to issue excluded debt, the town required a separate positive vote at the ballot box two weeks later. That article failed by about 30 votes, so the town started again with this committee.

- **Why didn't we reuse the old TH plans?**

The needs of the town have changed since the 2018 plans were drafted. At that time, the committee was asked to consider having the entire old Town Hall structure reserved for civic and cultural organizations, meaning the second floor of the building would no longer house town employees. This time, it was more prudent to make use of all the space available. Offices will remain on the second floor of old town hall and the auditorium will be restored for civic and cultural use. In addition, the

committee was asked to include more functions in the building and to make the building as efficient and flexible as possible to be able to adapt to future needs. This new design accomplishes those goals.

- **How much will the new design cost?**

The committee was able to make use of previous building condition and programming studies to help inform this design and its decisions. We engaged the architectural firm Johnson Roberts & Associates and have worked with them for over a year to design a building to meet the needs of the town. To date, \$191,700 has been spent on this design concept. In the next phases of the design process, we will work together to fine tune the details - such as building product specifications - and then construction documents will be created to go out to bid. The THBC will request \$750,000 at Annual Town Meeting on May 24th in order to complete the design work through the bid process. (Note that number includes \$50,000 for a geothermal test well to determine if that path is an option for the building's heating and cooling system.)

- **How much would it cost to just renovate the existing building?**

The Town commissioned a complete study of the original building and its 1980s annex to determine the cost to update the systems and interiors, to repair the rot, etc. The total cost, including construction, sitework, contingencies, relocation of staff, design, etc. is estimated to be \$9.7 million. This was not a bid for the work but merely an estimate based on the scope of the project and would only repair what is already there. It would not include some investments that might have to be made to bring the building up to code, including adding a second form of egress from the basement and making the two sets of stairs fit the fire code, nor landscaping and repaving, all of which would add to the cost. A significant investment in the building will have to be made one way or another.

- **What is the recommendation of the THBC and how much will that cost?**

The THBC is unanimously in favor of restoring old town hall and tearing down the existing annex, rebuilding one with quality workmanship, adequate space and flexibility to meet current and future needs. Nearly all of the members of the Select Board, Advisory Board and Capital Budget Committee agree with this conclusion. The existing annex does not have adequate meeting room space for staff or the dozens of volunteer boards who host hundreds of meetings in the building each year. To keep the town running, new departments have been created since the 1980s annex was built – e.g. IT, engineering, human resources – and many employees have been added. In addition, other organizations including 143tv and Safe Harbor have agreements from the town promising them space in town hall. There is not enough space in the existing building to house everyone. Plus, the existing annex is full of load-bearing walls, which cannot be moved to change office configurations, and the building is difficult to navigate. The new design would be very efficient with easy-to-find offices, and it would be flexible to adapt to changing needs in the future. Finally, a new building could provide a more attractive façade, in keeping with the historic character of the old town hall and the Town Common. The total cost of that project is estimated to be \$13.5 - \$14.5 million.

- **Why is it so much more expensive than building a home?**

There are many requirements governing municipal construction projects, all designed to try and limit corruption and avoid poor craftsmanship. The town is required to engage an owner's project manager (OPM) to provide oversight to the project – something that would have been helpful to make our 1980s annex last longer - and all trade workers must be paid the Massachusetts "prevailing wage" rate.

Our OPM, Vertex, shared that the hourly wages of the Scituate Senior Center construction project are \$91 for plumbers, \$69 for electricians and \$72 for carpenters, for example. The fully loaded (including overhead, profit, insurance, etc.) average wage on that project is \$117 per hour.

- **What is the proposed plan to pay for the project? What is the impact to taxpayers?**

Funds to pay for the project are likely to come from many sources, though it is still early in the planning and nothing is set yet. The THBC and town staff are exploring potential grant alternatives for infrastructure and “green” projects and aim to offset as much of the cost as possible in this way. The Community Preservation Commission expressed support of the project in 2018 with an offer of up to \$4 million for the historic restoration, and we are awaiting a meeting with them in hopes of reaffirming their support. For the balance, the THBC is working with other governing committees and the town finance department to fit this project into the Town’s 10-year Capital Plan. If we are successful, as we hope to be, there will be no impact on taxes.

- **Will this project have any effect on future funding for school projects?**

This project and all other requests are incorporated into the Town’s 10-year capital plan. How the town finances each of these projects is determined at the time of implementation. At this point, the Town Hall project should not effect funding for school projects that are in the 10-year plan.

- **What consideration was given to changes in town governance due to the pandemic?**

To minimize infection transmission, the building plan calls for appropriate spacing of employees and will specify HVAC measures to filter the air. It is anticipated that employees will be back in the building full time and that town governance will return to in-person meetings. Though certainly some hybrid models may exist, the space plan will allow for full in-person governance.

- **What green alternatives are being considered?**

The building will be constructed in the most energy efficient manner that makes economic sense. High R-value insulation will be specified, and systems will be highly efficient and exceed the stretch code. The THBC is also exploring the idea of heating and cooling the building with geothermal technology. The Alternative Energy Committee has been kept aware of the project and will consult on construction details and grant opportunities.

- **How can I find out more information?**

The THBC is hosting a public forum over zoom on Thursday, May 13 at 7:00pm. Please join us! In the meantime, check out our website at <http://www.cohassetma.org/446/Cohasset-Town-Hall-Building-Committee> for the latest design and follow us on Facebook for updates.