

SPURWINK SCHOOL REUSE RECOMMENDATION



March 29, 2018

Spurwink School Reuse Committee

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SPURWINK SCHOOL REUSE COMMITTEE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Upon the completion of the renovated Thomas Memorial Library in 2016, the Town Council outlined as one of its goals to determine an appropriate use for the vacated former Spurwink School building, which had most recently served as the children's library and temporary full library. To accomplish this objective, an ad hoc committee – comprised of two town councilors, two school board members, and an at-large member from the community – was established by a vote of the Town Council, charged with reviewing reuse proposals and making a recommendation for consideration.

As the committee met and evaluated proposed uses, it was guided by several overriding principles:

1. That any recommended use of the building have a community benefit and serve a public purpose;
2. That the merits of any proposed use stand on their own, not simply relative to the other proposals being considered;
3. And that the recommended use be responsible in any impact to Cape Elizabeth taxpayers.

With these factors in mind, the committee met from May 2016 to March 2018 (with a hiatus in activity during that period) to review submitted proposals, request research and due diligence on the condition of the facility, and deliberate about the best possible use.

We conclude that locating the Cape Elizabeth Historical Preservation Society in the building is a viable and good use of the facility that would provide benefit to the community, and are pleased to give the Town Council our unanimous endorsement of their proposal.

Committee Members:

Jamie Garvin, Chairman and Town Council Representative
Caitlin Jordan, Town Council Representative
Heather Altenberg, School Board Representative
John Voltz, School Board Representative
Jim Walsh, Community At-Large Representative
Perry Schwarz, Director of Facilities and Transportation

BACKGROUND

The Spurwink School building dates back to 1849. It was originally located on Bowery Beach Road, was moved to the town center and dedicated as the community library in 1944. Most recently it existed as the children's room of the Thomas Memorial Library, as well as the temporary home of the full library while construction work was underway on the now renovated main library. As work on the renovations neared completion, former town manager Mike McGovern sought out input from both staff and the community about possible long-term uses for the building.

A survey was included in tax bills sent to Cape Elizabeth residents in 2015 asking a series of questions based on town council goals for that year. Among them was one asking what should be done with the Spurwink School. More than 51% of the residents who responded to the survey said they would like to see the historic building reused for a public purpose. 17% recommended the building be demolished, with slightly more than 24% wanted to see the building offered for rent to the private sector.

From 2015 survey:

Original Library Building at Rear of Library Lot

The former library building at the rear of the library lot will be empty when the new library opens early next year.

17.6% The building should be demolished. (142)

51.5% The building should be repurposed for public use, such as for school offices . (416)

24.3% The building should be converted to space to be rented out to the private sector. (196)

6.6% Other (53)

With the clear majority of respondents indicating a desire for public use, McGovern inquired to all municipal departments and to the school department on potential public uses on the Spurwink School. When he reported that none of the department heads voiced a pressing need or strong desire to occupy the facility, the Town Council voted (February 2016) to establish an ad hoc committee to solicit proposals and recommendations for reuse.

The committee first met May 4, 2016, and held regular meetings through the end of that year, conducting organizing activities, beginning the process of requesting proposals, and requesting the facilities and transportation director to conduct a review of the condition of the building and make preliminary estimations about the work effort and possible cost of any required improvements.

SUBMITTED PROPOSALS

In June 2016, the committee developed a Request for Information (RFI) to identify parties with an interest in utilizing the facility. The RFI sought the following from respondents:

Proposal

The Spurwink School Committee is requesting information as to the intended future use of the Spurwink School based on submitted criteria provided below.

1. Description of the program or use of the facility
2. Public benefit of the program or use of the facility
3. Type of access needed and hours of operation of the program or use of the facility
4. Resources requested by the program or use of the facility from the Town of Cape Elizabeth
5. Resources provided by the program or use of the facility to meet the needs of the facility for their program or use
6. Special security or environmental requirements
7. Financial ability to cover the costs of facility's utilities
8. Timeline for the program or use to be operational
9. Projected capacity levels of the program or use
10. Any other information regarding the program or use pertinent for the Spurwink School Committee review process

The committee received four submissions for consideration by the following groups and/or for the following uses:

- Cape Elizabeth Historical Preservation Society
- Cape Hub
- Cape Care
- Cape Elizabeth Senior Center

Refer to Appendix for RFI responses.

Subsequent meetings were then set up allowing representatives for each proposed use to present their plans and respond to questions from the committee.

REVIEW AND EVALUATION

As we met with each interested group, it immediately became clear that two of the proposed uses were not widely supported by either the committee or the town staff directly associated with them.

First, in the case of the Cape Care recommendation, the RFI respondent actually withdrew her submission after speaking with the late director of community services (Russell Packett). Even with the submission withdrawn, the committee did meet with Packett to discuss its merits. It was his determination, supported by his staff and agreed to by the director of facilities, that the Spurwink School building was not suitable the needs of their programming, and that there were a number of reasons that relocating the successful and thriving child care services from their existing location in the Community Services building would not be in their best interests.

Similarly, the suggested use of creating a place to serve the needs of Cape Elizabeth's senior citizens was deemed early on to face numerous challenges, most notably relating to accessibility upgrades that would be required to make the building appropriate for their needs. It was also highlighted by the director of community services that additional programming for the senior community was continually being added, and that while it would be nice to have a specific senior citizen center, the needs of that group could be met in existing facilities.

There was substantial discussion about the Cape Hub proposal with John Holdridge, volunteer and extended learning opportunities coordinator in the school department, and Howard Colter, interim school superintendent. The committee took great interest in the proposal as a forward-looking new space for delivering hands-on instruction and learning. As the committee continued to discuss and evaluate the idea, it received direction from the superintendent that, while supportive of the objectives that would be achieved in creating such an innovation lab environment, the school department had a growing concern about taking on the obligation of supporting and budgeting for the additional space given its other priorities. Further, there was the suggestion that the type of programming that would potentially be offered could be integrated into other curriculum opportunities and in other existing spaces within the three schools. For these reasons, the Cape Hub proposal was effectively withdrawn.

The committee expressed favorable interest in the Cape Elizabeth Historical Preservation Society's proposal early on. Members of the CEHPS, including its president Jim Rowe, were active participants in our meetings and engaged throughout our process. The group presented a well thought out vision for how it would use the facility, why it was a natural fit as an historic building in Cape Elizabeth, and how the organization would be able to grow and thrive if given the opportunity to occupy the building.

RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE

The committee concluded that locating the Cape Elizabeth Historical Preservation Society at the Spurwink School is the best use of the facility for the following reasons:

1. The historic nature of the building, along with its proximity to the library and prominent location in the town center, make the CEHPS a logical occupant.
2. The town has a records management agreement with the CEHPS and a vested interest in the preservation and archiving of the town's documents. As the CEHPS' collections continue to grow over time, the need for additional storage and archival space is critical.
3. The public will benefit from better access to the town's historic archives and a space for new and expanded programming, including potential collaborations with the Thomas Memorial Library and other community organizations.

In addition to the above, which are specific to the merits of the CEHPS and its proposal, there is a notable secondary benefit that carries considerable weight in a wider view evaluation of how to best utilize all of the town's facilities and space. In the process of this review, the town's technology department suggested to the town manager that it would recognize significant benefits to its operations by having its primary location in the space at the Public Safety building that would be vacated by the CEHPS as part of a move to the Spurwink School.

Details Still To Be Determined

Throughout our review, the committee identified a number of important questions regarding costs for renovations and building improvements, review and approvals process, structure of any new or amended agreements between the town and the CEHPS.

Among the options that were discussed during our review were:

- The CEHPS making a one-time contribution to necessary building upgrades and improvements.
- The town leasing the space to the CEHPS.
- Potentially donating the building to the CEHPS, relieving the town from its maintenance and upkeep.

One specific item that will also need to be addressed is the additional parking and associated infrastructure requirements that would be necessary for any expansion of use beyond what is currently permitted with the lot serving the existing library.

NEXT STEPS

The committee recommends the town council vote to:

- Direct the town manager and director of facilities and transportation to work directly with the CEHPS to draft any updates to the existing agreement between the town and the organization, or develop a new memorandum of understanding if necessary, with mutually agreeable terms of occupancy.
- Request the manager and director to provide the council with a more detailed cost estimate for necessary renovations and fit out of the building, along with a rough timeline for a potential move. This would include any agreement with CEHPS specifying any funding to be contributed by the organization.
- Schedule a workshop in the near future to further discuss and review this recommendation.

Meeting Materials and Documentation

All of the meeting agendas and supporting documents are archived for reference on the town's website at: https://www.capeelizabeth.com/government/bds_commissions/ad_hoc/spurwink_school/home.html