

Stowe Public Safety Facilities Committee

Report of Committee

October 9, 2007

INTRODUCTION:

After numerous failed votes to solve the building problems facing Stowe's Public Safety agencies, namely the building's age, condition and inadequate size, the Select Board (hereafter called the "Board") appointed a Committee of citizens to review the situation and make recommendations. Stowe's Public Safety agencies consist of the Police, Fire, Rescue and Mountain Rescue Departments.

Specifically, the Board charged the Committee with the following 5 tasks:

1. To determine, to the extent possible, the issues surrounding why previous bond votes failed.
2. To reevaluate the overall facility needs of the public safety agencies and compare them with the proposed facility in the previous facility proposals. The committee should recommend whether we should keep the previous proposal and send it back to the voters or seek an alternative proposal.
3. The current assumption for a new Public Safety Facility (PSF) is to collocate all the agencies and to plan for a facility that will last 30 years. The committee should offer recommendations as to whether this assumption is correct or a lesser time period be considered.
4. To develop a plan for providing public education about the proposal.
5. If it is determined that another proposal should be developed, develop a cost estimate for the necessary facility planning.

METHODOLOGY:

The Committee consisted of Lynn Baumrind, Helen Beckerhoff, Les Goldberg, Edward Griffiths, Ken Libby and Barbara Pfitzenmayer from the public and was staffed by Town Manager Charles Safford, Public Works Director Justin Rabidoux and Scott Brinkman of the Rescue Squad who was appointed as a non-voting member representing all the public safety agencies. The Committee met Tuesdays at 4 pm at the Fire Station starting on July 17, 2007.

Ken Libby was elected Chair and Les Goldberg Vice Chair. The following documents were provided and reviewed prior to the second meeting:

1. Mayo Farm Management Plan of June 2003, specifically the Land Development Approval Process in Section 13
2. List of calls for service from public safety agency since 1988
3. Historic Time Line of various plans and votes since 2001
4. The draft Stowe 10-year Recreation Master Plan
5. Vermont Statutes 24 V.S.A. § 138. Local Option Taxes
6. Chart – Cost of \$5,000,000 bond over 20 years at 4.562%
7. Chart – Cost of \$7,000,000 bond over 20 years at 4.562%

8. Letter from agency department heads to the Stowe Reporter dated 8-25-03
9. Report of similar committee chaired by Peter Beck in 2003
10. Mayo Farm Homestead Zone Management plan
11. Town of Stowe Capital Budget & Program dated 9-26-2005
12. Cushman & Beckstrom, Inc. feasibility study dated 2-22-2001
13. Feasibility study for PSF of E.H. Danson Associates dated 9-8-2006

FINDINGS:

At the first meeting a discussion about the nature of the charge statement from the Board was held. The Chair asked everyone what their feelings were going into the meeting about why previous votes failed and where a new building should be located. Everyone had a number of reasons why they felt the vote failed but most centered on lack of proper education, the project's cost and a lack of perceived commitment from the Board supporting any previous proposals.

Four of the six members of the committee felt the new facility should be at the Mayo Farm and it would be in the best interest of the Town of Stowe in future years.

It was decided that the second meeting would begin with a tour of the various existing public safety buildings. Members of the committee received the various reports listed above, reviewed them and they were discussed.

After the tour, many of the members were surprised by the lack of space and the lack of preventative maintenance. It was noted in the Executive Summary of the June 2003 Beck Committee Report "*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*".

This was also similar to other observations dating from the 2001 study and also in the 2006 study, which indicated the buildings are no longer sufficient for the needs of the current operations, never mind the future. This committee agrees strongly with these observations.

The 2001 Cushman & Beckstrom study stated that space needs at that time were insufficient and by 2011 both of the buildings would need to be expanded. It is six years later and there has been no action. The buildings continue to become structurally compromised (see the 2006 E.H. Danson report) and morale continues to decline among the building's users.

Department heads from the public safety agencies were invited to the third meeting. They were asked to try and forget the past rejections and to focus on what they thought would be the best solution for the citizens of Stowe and their department in 30 years. The most important message received from the department heads is that they do not think the Mayo Farm location is the place to be. Many reasons were cited but most related to the location that current members respond to and from, where they live, etc. and the overall impact on response time. The current location is easier for first responders to get to in their personal vehicles and also easier and safer for emergency apparatuses to respond from. An ambulance or fire truck responding from Mayo Farm down into the village or points south could encounter the long delays coming down Route 108. If those delays exist, the only option is to drive down Route 108 in the oncoming lane, not a desirable alternative given the road's winding geometry.

Some members wondered if the answers given were a result of the feeling that any project on the Mayo Farm would delay the replacement of these buildings due to design and permitting issues. Also, it may receive resistance from voters and Mayo Farm abutters due to its location.

The committee set aside one night for citizens to visit and share their thoughts on the project's past, present and future. The Stowe Reporter ran two articles and a Guest Perspective from Ken Libby discussing the project and promoting the public hearing. On the night set aside no one from the public attended. The Committee did receive a message sent through one of the members. Following the meeting, the Stowe Reporter ran a story about the unattended public hearing. That led to six additional people sharing their thoughts with the Committee via email or phone. A couple of responses indicated that votes against the March 2007 ballot item were the result of the public's feeling that the design had a lot of unnecessary frills such as the climbing wall. Needless to say the climbing wall was in the original Rescue Squad plan for the Mayo Farm back in 2003, and has not been in any other plans since then. This confirms the public's confusion about the project in general.

The Committee also met with Roy Ward, the lead architect from E.H. Danson Associates, about the 2006 plans and the process that led up to the final design. Roy made it clear that there are no frills in the plans. He met a number of times with the users and goal was to get a set of plans which will stand the test of time while not being excessive. The plans were also reviewed in a number of meetings with the Board where they were carefully studied to make sure there were no frills. In answer to a question, Roy indicated that normal inflation for building costs is 3-8% per year, but that since 2003 that number has been 8-15% per year.

Justin Rabidoux informed the committee that he investigated recent similar construction around Vermont. The most recent, the Williston Fire & Police buildings, done in 2006-2007, had a completed construction cost of about \$220.00 per square foot. This includes all cost, permitting, design, infrastructure & actual building costs and is similar to the '06 E.H. Danson estimate.

The committee also interviewed Tom Jackman, Director of Planning for the Town of Stowe. The purpose was to fully understand the permitting process for Mayo Farm versus other locations. It became apparent that the Mayo Farm process would add at least one construction season to the process, most likely more than that.

At the conclusion of the meeting with Roy Ward and Tom Jackman the Committee, on a motion by Ken Libby seconded by Les Goldberg, voted to eliminate consideration of the Mayo Farm site from the agenda and to concentrate on the 2006 plan to demolish the existing buildings and build a new facility on the current Route 100 site.

CHARGE STATEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS:

#1: To determine, to the extent possible, the issues surrounding why the previous bond votes failed.

It is the opinion of the committee that many factors were likely involved but identifiable ones include:

- a. The total price of the project is in the \$6,500,000 range. That comes with sticker shock and voters fear the tax impact of the project. A better way to sell the project is to break it down in terms of the increase in the tax rate, i.e., 2.6¢ on the grand list.
- b. Lack of perceived support by members of the Board. All members must believe in the project and help sell it. The public assumes lack of vocal support means the Board does not support the project.

- c. Confusion among the voters about what is the right project. In six years there have been three different proposals, making it hard for the public to keep track of the project and know its current status.
- d. A feeling that the 2003 vote was held prior to the Mayo Farm Management Plan being finished. The Plan addressed municipal uses on the Mayo Farm, and until the Plan was complete the public would not approve any Mayo Farm projects.

#2: To reevaluate the overall facility needs of the public safety agencies and compare them with the proposed facility in the previous facility proposals. The committee should recommend whether we should keep the previous proposal and send it back to the voters or seek an alternative proposal.

- a. The committee agrees that the current facilities are overcrowded and would need major repair if a new facility is not on the horizon.
- b. All department heads support the 2006 plan in the current location. Roy Ward of E.H. Danson convinced the committee that the 2006 plan is a 30-year plan and does not contain frills.
- c. The current facility has parking problems when multiple departments have a majority of their members responding to a call, but this is rare.
- d. The Committee heard about the need to make minor revisions to the '06 plans in the rescue squad area. It chose not to get involved in micro designing the interior of the building and understands that additional design is needed to prepare construction plans and concerns will be addressed at that time.
- e. There was agreement that the current location provides high visibility for the public of the Police Department, which is a benefit. Visibility of the rest of the agencies was not thought to be as critical as was a proper facility and location.

#3: The current assumption for a new Public Safety Facility is to collocate all the agencies and to plan for a facility that will last for 30 years. This committee should offer recommendations as to whether this assumption is correct or should a lesser time period be considered.

- a. The consensus was 30 years is the minimum that should be planned for. (Note: A 20-year bond is the anticipated funding source).
- b. Collocation for the Fire, Rescue and Mountain Rescue Departments is important. The recent trend of a reduction in the volunteer force is likely to continue. Already the rescue squad is less than 50% of what full staffing should be. As property taxes and other forces compel citizens to move to neighboring communities the need for a full-time, crossed trained agency is highly possible. If that occurs it will be mandatory that they be collocated. The Committee feels that visibility for the Police is more important than collocation.

#4: To develop a plan for providing public education about the proposal.

- a. All publications must discuss the cost in terms of the annual cost and not the overall construction costs. As an example, 1¢ on the 2007 tax rate would raise \$191,000. The average annual cost of a \$7,000,000.00 bond would be \$499,336, which is an increase of 2.6¢ on the tax rate.
- b. A 2.6¢ tax increase is an additional \$104 of taxes for a property assessed at \$400,000.
- c. As the years move on the cost will decrease since the value of the grand list will increase and the annual tax rate for this project will decrease.

- d. Since the voters appeared uninterested in informing themselves by attending the Committee's meeting, we need to go to them. This can be accomplished by preparing photos that demonstrate the lack of space for use in newspaper articles and foam boards displayed in public areas.
- e. Members of the committee are willing to assist to sell the project as designed. We are willing to host community/neighborhood meetings, address Eastern Star, Rotary Club and other similar groups. We feel that having the users of the building being the only ones advocating for the project is counterproductive.
- f. Weekly articles in the Stowe Reporter and on radio should be part of the mix.

#5: If it is determined that another proposal should be developed, develop a cost estimate for the necessary facility planning.

The recommendation is to focus on the project as developed and present it to the voters for their consideration at the March '08 Town Meeting Day, rendering item #5 not applicable at this time.

CONCLUSIONS:

The committee has evaluated all issues presented, reviewed all previous reports and interviewed users, citizens and town employees as well as E.H. Danson's lead architect, Roy Ward.

It is the unanimous decision of the committee to recommend that the Board revive the design as prepared by E.H. Danson in 2006 and prepare it for another vote in March of 2008.

As part of the process the Board should decide funding sources for this bond issue. The Committee discussed the fact that while the full-time population of Stowe is 4,400 the planning number really needs to be 12,000 given the effective daily population of the community cited in the 2003 Stowe Town Plan. Having a source of funding that would allow the visitors to the community to assist in this matter makes sense. Three funding methods were discussed:

1. Use a minimum of \$250,000 annually for the 20-year bond life from the current funds raised by the 1% tax on rooms & meals.
2. Install a 1% sales tax and dedicate it to the bond payments for the next 20 years. A 1% sales tax will raise about \$390,000 in 2007 dollars, about 80% of the average annual cost of a \$7,000,000 bond.
3. Increase property taxes approximately 2.6¢ to fund the bond repayments.

Les Goldberg made a motion, seconded by Helen Beckerhoff, that the Committee recommends funding Option 1 to the Board, using a minimum of \$250,000 annually from the LOTAC funds. Option 1 reduces any necessary tax increase by 50%. The motion passed 6-0.

Having some assistance in the annual bonding cost will make the project more palatable to the voters. The Committee and members of the Board need to begin the education process. It is proposed that the Committee continue to meet once a month through the winter leading up to a March vote to assist the Board with the education component. The Committee is against delaying the project beyond a March vote; any delay leads to increased construction costs of approximately 10%, equating to \$700,000 annually.

The committee would like to thank the Public Safety department heads, Scott Brinkman and particularly Justin Rabidoux and Charles Safford for their support and assistance during this process.

Respectfully Submitted,

Ken Libby, Chair

Helen Beckerhoff

Les Goldberg, Vice Chair

Edward Griffiths

Lynn Baumrind

Barbara Pfitzenmayer