

Town Office Study

Old Office

Moretown's governance and administrative functions had outgrown the Town Office, long before the flood caused by Tropical Storm Irene.

The former office consisted of two sections, the front (older) building which housed the Town Clerk, and the back (newer) building which housed the Town Treasurer, Selectboard, Zoning Administrator, and Listers.

The Town Clerk had about 323 sq. ft. of office space. The adjacent vault was 84 sq. ft. The bathroom was 31 sq. ft.

The back section was divided into three rooms; the Selectboard room was 241 sq. ft., the Treasurer's office was 96 sq. ft. and the third room was intended to be the Listers' office, 98 sq. ft., but in recent years it was mostly used for storage. The small bathroom had stored items in it, as well.

The total usable office space was 758 sq. ft. for all administrative activities. File cabinets and boxes took up much of the floor space. During a normal business day it was common to have the five or more office employees working in the building, as well as lawyers researching the land records and files, plus residents and other visitors doing business with the Town. The Listers' room was full of storage. In December and January, the three Auditors are also in the office preparing for Town Meeting.

In the evenings during Selectboard meetings, the back office would be nearly full with just the five board members and their administrative assistant, plus a reporter. There was seating capacity for about half a dozen guests, the rest stood wherever they could find room. Those waiting for their turn on the agenda would often need to stand outdoors or in the front office.

Because this space was inadequate, the Selectboard had charged the Planning Commission with considering viable options, and a recommendation for expanding the office space. One option was to build onto the existing Town Office; however, the recent flooding from Tropical Storm Irene has removed this option from consideration.

Unanimous consensus among the town office employees is that they do not want to reoccupy the former office building. Although the land records (which were in the vault) are hopefully being restored from the flood damage, most of the contents of file cabinets (not in the vault) were lost in the flood. Lister' cards, zoning files, and other valuable documents have been lost. Some of these documents are irreplaceable, and the full ramifications are yet to be known.

Discussions with the office employees indicated a need for at least twice the 758 sq. ft. of usable space in the old office. That would be about 1,500 sq. ft. or more. Additionally, a new vault would need to be at least twice its former size, or at minimum of 175 sq. ft., and it is necessary in whatever the final decision is. The old vault was too small, so even if we were to rebuild in the old location (unlikely) we'd still need to build a new larger vault. We think the vault door can be reused in the new location.

Before the flood, it was thought that the vacated office could possibly be rented or sold as office space. Since the flood, this might not be as feasible? Other options for the vacated office might be; use by the Town Library or other group, if they are willing to take a chance on future flooding. Or possibly for some kind of storage of non-essential equipment or supplies for the town or school.

If we decide to keep the Town Office in the village, our options were somewhat limited, even more so now after the flood. Options that were considered but rejected:

Building a new office in back, behind the school by the tennis courts. But there is no septic capacity there, and traffic would bisect the school playground. A long access road would likely need to be paved, adding significant cost.

Buying and renovating an existing village building. Nothing suitable is available that would provide enough parking or space. The old Ward big house might be a possibility, but cost to purchase, renovate, and parking would be expensive issues.

Town Hall

The Town Hall might be suitable for the Town Office, however it would require substantial renovation and it would change the character of the 176-year-old building.

The big room downstairs is 940 sq. ft. with no windows, and it's only 193 sq. ft. larger than the old office space. The kitchen (242 sq. ft.) could be renovated into office space but the combined downstairs space would only provide a 435 sq. ft. increase of space. And a 175+ sq. ft. vault would need to be built on to the historic building, accessible from the Clerk's office. All of this might be an option, except that the basement flooded during Irene.

Upstairs is big enough, but it would require turning the meeting room and stage into office space. The stage is 570 sq. ft., which is about 150 sq. ft. larger than the old Clerk and Treasurer's offices combined. This might work, if the clerk and

Treasurer are one person, as it is today. But if the voters elect two people for the two positions, it might not be enough space for both, with assistants. Somehow, a vault would need to be built, probably two stories high, to be accessible to the Town Clerk on the stage.

If the Clerk and Treasurer occupy the stage, the Selectboard, Zoning Administrator, Listers and everyone else would need to occupy the main floor area. Clearly, there would be less room for Town Meetings, or other activities in the Town Hall. And the "lift" might need to be upgraded for more frequent use, unlike the infrequent use it provides currently.

The Town Hall is old, drafty, and not well insulated. It works for meetings in the winter, on an irregular basis, but it is not really warm enough for an everyday office. Plus, the everyday wear and tear might be detrimental to the old fragile building. And parking is very limited during the weekdays, when the clapboard mill is in operation.

The Town Hall would not be an ideal option for a new Town Office.

Building a New Town Office Building

Looking at the flood map of the village, there are not many options for a buildable lot that is out of the flood plain. The old office site was a tight fit between the church and the parking lot access road, so a building twice that size would be even tighter. Plus the fact that 6 feet of water flooded the site, pretty much takes this site out of consideration.

The site of the late David Kingsbury's house is about the only realistic possibility. The house was recently torn down, leaving a 2-acre lot remaining. The area where the house stood is flat, at road level, and in the 500-year flood zone, marginally above the Irene flood. The back of the lot slopes up a hill, and might be suitable for an office site, with the lower area used for parking.

At this point, we have not yet heard back from the Kingsbury family, to know if the lot is for sale or how much they might want for it.

Access might be problematic, as the lot sits just south of Hurdle Rd. on the blind curve on RT. 100B as it enters the village. For safety, it would probably make sense to access the site from Hurdle Rd., which would require upgrading and maybe paving for the increased traffic. At this time, Hurdle Road is not wider than one lane.

It's difficult to estimate the cost of building a new Town Office from scratch, without designing it first. The following costs are vague rough guestimates of a yet to be designed office. Square footage and other considerations would likely change in the actual design process.

Discussions with several builders in the Moretown area indicated an approximate price of about \$150 per square foot for a good quality, not extravagant, office building. If we need at least 1,500 sq. ft. of space, that would cost about \$225,000 to build. A 2,000 sq. ft. building might cost \$300,000. This is just for the building, not including site-work, well, septic, or anything else required or added to the project. It's not known if the well or septic from the Kingsbury house would be usable. A ground level first floor vault might be an additional \$20,000.

Building an office on the hill would require excavating and grading a flat office site, and a way to drive up to the office for handicap access and to deliver materials, etc. At this time we do not know the cost of paving the parking area, driveway and possibly Hurdle Road.

Estimating the costs for building a new building on this lot are hypothetical at this point. But if we just go with rough (really rough) estimates:

Lot purchase: \$50,000
Site work: \$50,000
Building construction: \$225,000
Vault: \$20,000
Paving: \$20,000

Approximate, hypothetical Total: \$365,000 ? Maybe?

The Two Classrooms in the Old School

The classrooms in the old school building were above the floodwater during Irene. Each room is about 645 sq. ft., and each classroom has two nooks, 52 and 72 sq. ft. That is a combined total of 1538 sq. ft. of office space. Each room has a bathroom.

The Town Office entrance would be through the breezeway annex between the old and new buildings. As it is today, you can enter there and turn right to go up the stairs to the old classrooms, or turn left to enter the newer building. This access to the newer school building would need to be restricted, to prevent access to the school through there. An elevator or handicap lift could be installed across from the entrance door, going up to the Clerk/Treasurer's office. The vault would be built next to the lift, also accessing the Clerk's office.

Converting these classrooms to office space would require minimal renovation, compared to constructing an entire new building. The vault and lift would be the biggest expense. Keep in mind that constructing a vault is an expense common to all options. A lift may be necessary in other options as well.

The north classroom would likely be the selectboard's office, with the Zoning Administrator's office possibly in the larger nook. The room is more than twice the size of the old Selectboard office, easily large enough to accommodate typical selectboard meetings. When a large attendance is anticipated, the Town Hall would be used, as is done now.

The south classroom would be the Town Clerk & Treasurer's office; it's twice the size of the old Town Clerk's space. The vault could be built behind the building, accessible on the Clerk's office floor elevation. There is ample room in the south classroom for attorneys to search the land records, as well as room for the Listers and Auditors to do their work.

Estimating the hypothetical costs for this option:

Vault: \$30,000 (\$25k for concrete + \$5k for electrical and remodeling)

Lift: \$30,000

Remodeling to make this work: \$40,000

Approximate, hypothetical Total: \$100,000 ?

Conclusion/Recommendation

The two most promising options for a new Town Office seem to be the school classrooms or new construction on the Kingsbury lot. Without real estimates from contractors, it's difficult to put too much faith in the rough costs outlined in this narrative. However, unless the lot, the work, and the materials are all donated, we don't need blueprints to know that new construction on a side-hill lot will be a few hundred thousand dollars or more. The school option would require a vault (common to both options), a lift and some relatively minor remodeling. The classroom costs are also vague, but not nearly as much as new construction.

The Town Office is where Moretown does business. Many residents do not visit the Office very often, maybe only once or twice a year to pay their taxes, or pick up a dump sticker or a dog license. But many residents and non-residents, lawyers, brokers and other business people do business there regularly. The office setting affects the mood in the workplace, and leaves an impression on visitors. The old office was cramped and shabby. Our new office ought to project a positive dignified image for Moretown. An impressive building obviously costs

more than a cheap ordinary one. Cost is always a consideration, now even more so since the flood.

The old school building is a classic design for an old New England school or municipal office. It has a stately presence in the middle of the village. The classrooms are wood trimmed, with high ceilings and large multi-paned windows providing abundant light. It is a very positive work environment. It was designed to be a school, after all.

Since it was built in 1931(?), the old building has been a proud presence in the village, and the crown jewel of the Moretown School. There are many who feel, justifiably, that this old building should remain a part of the school. We may not be able to afford that, on either side of the equation.

Today, the fifth and sixth grades occupy these classrooms; all the younger students are in the newer building. Moretown Elementary School enrollment peaked in 1993-94 at 210 students. The School Board predicts enrollment will be down to 111 students in a couple of years.

Nothing indicates this 20-year decline is likely to revert very quickly, and we'll have ample time to figure out how to deal with it, if it does. Enrollment won't double overnight. Building two additional classrooms years from now may be an easier problem to solve than the urgent Town Office crisis we have today. At least we'll have a little time to figure that out. And what if the trend does not reverse itself? What if we build a new Town Office now, for several hundred thousand dollars, and then see enrollment continue to drop, or Moretown's 5th and 6th graders are sent to Crossett Brook Middle School in a few years?

State funding is calculated per pupil. When our enrollment declines, so does State money. The School Board has asked the Town to help pay for shared expenses, like plowing or mowing, or however we can subsidize the shrinking education funds from the State. They've suggested marketing our school to encourage young families to move to Moretown, to increase school enrollment. Rising property taxes will not help any marketing efforts. And if the Town Office were to move into the old school, with a 99-year lease, annual "rent" payments would help pay the school's heating, electrical and janitorial expenses.

Of the two viable options for a Town Office, the old school classrooms make a lot of sense. The cost would be far less than purchasing a site and building a new office, and the waiting time to move in would be much shorter. The finished product is already visible, it exists, and we know what we'll be paying for and how the project will turn out.

In ordinary times, this Town Office proposal would spawn a long and lively debate. But these are not ordinary times. Tropical Storm Irene caused significant loss and expense for Moretown. The floodwater is gone, but the dark clouds of road repair, bridge replacement, lost equipment, and the unknown consequences to our grand list still linger over Moretown. It's unclear how much expense the taxpayers will be forced to bear, but it likely will be significant. The town faced fiscal uncertainty before the flood, as Moretown Landfill's application for extended life is uncertain.

We need a new Office in minimal time, at minimal cost. The land records are being restored, but everything else was lost. The desks, file cabinets, shelves and boxes full of books, documents, zoning files, listers' files, letters, computers, whatever... all are gone. The Office employees are doing a heroic job recreating the Town, while operating out of the loft in the fire station, among piles of fire fighting equipment, with a shipping container for a vault. It's not business as usual. There hasn't been a real estate closing in Moretown since Irene passed through. The need for a Town Office is urgent. Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures.