

LEXINGTON

\$30.5m sought for DPW building Vote scheduled on replacing old barn

The Boston Globe

By Melissa Beecher, Globe Correspondent | November 26, 2006

The Department of Public Works barn needed repairs when William Kennedy got involved with Lexington's Permanent Building Committee in the late 1970s. Nearly three decades later, the problems have only grown.

The 1940s-era wood-framed barn that houses 45 trucks and plows cramped bumper-to-bumper needs renovation. Dirt, dust, and cigarette butts cover the concrete floors, and chain-link fencing separates tire and plumbing supplies from the dingy working spaces.

Filing cabinets take up precious space in the administrative offices, where the desks of four supervisors and three secretaries crowd one another. The public entrance has a step and no way for a person in a wheelchair to gain access.

On Wednesday, Town Meeting will decide if this is the year the town should spend the estimated \$30.5 million for a new facility. But the price tag has even the staunchest supporters nervous. "This has been a long time coming," said Kennedy. "I don't think there will be any opposition to the idea. The problem is . . . Town Meeting will balk at appropriating money during the design process. It is not a complete design, and the price tag is an estimate."

Two Special Town Meetings are scheduled to begin Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. at the Cary Memorial Building. One warrant has eight proposals that range from a \$1 million appropriation to fund the School Department deficit to a \$149,000 expenditure for various community improvements. The second Town Meeting has just two articles: a routine report of various committees and the multimillion-dollar Department of Public Works proposal. The new DPW facility has been designed by HKT Architects Inc. The 89,000-square-foot building could house 87 employees and 66 vehicles. That leaves room for growth: The DPW currently has just over 47,000 square feet for 60 employees and 61 vehicles. Last weekend, DPW Director William Hadley led an information session and tours around the facility, showing why the new space is needed. Several residents and Town Meeting members in attendance said they were concerned that so much money would be spent on building a massive garage to store DPW vehicles. "I worked out of this building for 23 years before becoming director," said Hadley. "And all we're looking to do is build vehicle storage inside again, continuing the practice that has gone on for over 70 years."

The \$30.5 million would be financed through a 20-year bond at an interest rate of 4.5 percent. For a home valued at the average of \$697,000, that initially would mean an additional \$239: \$181 in annual property taxes and \$58 more for water and sewer services. The rate increase would occur because water and sewer funds would be tapped to help pay for the building costs.

As the payments against the bond are made, the tax impact would lessen. So by 2024, the annual hit would be \$156: \$118 in annual taxes and \$38 in water and sewer rates.

At a meeting of the Town Meeting Members Association last week, Jeanne Krieger, chairwoman of the Board of Selectmen, said the price may be steep, but years of inaction have made the price escalate. "Conditions haven't changed in the last 18 years," she said. "The only thing certain is that the cost of construction has escalated, and they will continue to escalate."

Besides the demolition and construction, the \$30.5 million would fund enhancements to the Minuteman Bike Path that runs behind the DPW facility and across Bedford Street by adding public restrooms and an information kiosk.

Improvements to the on-site wetlands and appearance of the site have also been included. The biggest improvement for neighbors is that the 12 equipment doors that open and close at all hours of the night will be reduced to four, and buffering has been designed to reduce noise. Besides the DPW project, Town Meeting will decide several spending questions, not the least of which is \$1 million to cover a School Department deficit. Since the fiscal year began July 1, the budget has run \$788,000 over budget in special education tuition costs, \$132,000 in transportation associated with those students, and \$115,000 more to pay aides who help in-district special education students. Superintendent of Schools Paul Ash said at a meeting last week that the administration is doing all it can to reduce special ed costs. "This area of the budget is simply one that we do not have any control over," said Ash.

Although some families have moved into the district with special needs students, most of the costs have been from students already in town whose needs extend beyond what the public schools offer.

According to the School Department, of the 109 students who receive out-of-district services, only four moved into town within the last year.

School Committee Chairman Tom Diaz said that although the problem seems especially bad in Lexington, communities across the state are facing the same problem. "There have been some extraordinary expenses that we did not anticipate," said Diaz. In addition, Town Meeting will also vote on whether to:

Increase the Senior Tax Work Off Program by \$11,000 , which would allow an additional 13 seniors to participate.

Allocate \$149,000 for projects with Community Preservation Act money including \$60,000 for shelving at the Cary Memorial Library and \$25,000 for restorations to the Hancock-Clarke House.

Accept the section of Massachusetts General Laws that allows consolidation of town facilities departments. ■