

Public Hearing
Land & Building Acquisition
Monday, May 24, 2021

Present: Selectmen Leslie Babb, Ernie Day, Melissa Florio; Ellen White, Town Administrator; Rob Cunio, Fire Chief; Jeff Nicoll, Joel & Elizabeth Rhymer, Linda Habif, Jean Marshall, Alan Fall, Bill & Maureen Elliott, Susan Marks, Bonnie & Paul Elie, Janice Zecher, Josh Shackford, Police Chief; Phil & Nancy Griffin, Sue Hoople, Pam Keith, Chuck Brooks, David Bennett, Peg Scully, Sarah Tabor, Zenya Hernandez, Daymond Steer, and several others unidentified.

Chairman Babb opened the Public Hearing at 7:00 PM stating the purpose of the hearing is to begin discussion on the offer received. He will be opening to public input and accepting questions to be answered.

Janice Zecher requested Alan Fall present the offer made. Selectman Florio read the offer included in the minute's transcript received from Carroll Lodge #57.

Zecher questioned if the offer presented represents the entire membership? Of the Lodge? Fall responded that current membership is 27. The offer was made at the annual meeting and the original motion was revisited in a special communication held in February noticed to all members that did not attend the annual meeting giving them another opportunity to vote. Fall noted that Grand Lodge District Representative David Bennett is present here tonight.

Elizabeth Rhymer questioned what is required to maintain the charter? Fall responded that the annual expenses are \$4,000. Bennett responded that the District Deputy of Grand Lodge visits annually to check the files, books, etc., inspect the ritual to ensure a well-governed Lodge. There is no specific fiduciary or other requirement to maintain a lodge charter. Many have up to 110 members and others as few as 3, while others have merged smaller charters into one. Statistically, in 2008 there were 6,000 members statewide, now there are 4,800.

Paul Elie questioned the amount of \$4,000 stated to keep the doors open? Fall responded that the amount covers insurance, electric and heat.

E. Rhymer questioned if the Lodge pays taxes. Fall responded that they are tax-exempt.

Bonnie Elie asked for clarification that the Masons would have exclusive rights to the second floor but the Town pays all expenses? Babb confirmed. Responsibility for repair would then fall on the Town? Fall responded that this is in exchange for a \$370,000 building gifted to the Town.

Linda Habif questioned if any repairs are needed? Fall responded that there is minimal needed to maintain the building in its character. Babb stated the Building Inspector has reviewed the building and noted a roof repair needed. A quote received includes chimney repair for \$1,522, pressure wash and re-screw the metal roof at \$6,880 and replace the metal roof for \$22,500. Day added that additional recommendations were received to replace the electrical panel for \$1,000, and the heating system is noted as sufficient for continued use, but if that is to increase, an upgrade would be recommended. Florio stated that if the Town takes ownership of the building, the insurance may require additional work based on their inspection. Unknown conditions will be dealt with down the road.

Babb stated that the Town Office is in need of the parking lot but has no present need for the building, or potential expense related to it. Improvements may occur down the road, items to be mitigated, the

building has potential for a temporary office location during the Town Office renovations. Immediate need is for the parking lot and minimal maintenance.

Peg Scully is in support of the acquisition stating the building historic nature of 200 years starting as a church in 1830 and as the masonic lodge for almost 100 years of its age. An unused building would be a tragedy. Scully added that if town-owned the building would be eligible for L-CHIP and moose plate grant funds. The Heritage Commission could investigate other ways to help support.

Sarah Tabor is also in support of Scully's comments and stated the importance to hold onto and take care of a historic building.

Zenya Hernandez is in support of holding onto the oldest place of worship in the area, and in support of the people and community. She then read a statement she prepared reviewing the history of the building, the structure's craftsmanship, her family's architectural background and her appreciation for historic structures.

Zecher stated she is in favor of the project but concerned with what will happen to Carroll Lodge and the decision to be made after the second meeting. Can it wait until Bergeron can come in? Babb responded that if Bergeron is able to incorporate the building's use into the Town Office renovation plans it can be an option but the building acquisition and use is irrelevant to the Town Office project until Bergeron is able to begin his work.

Babb stated that they have looked into the eminent domain option but it will come with a price of approximately \$30,000-50,000 and would diminish the buildings value, presently stated at \$370,300.

Zecher questions if the Town acquires the building it will have to agree to the Lodge use? Fall responded that is a condition of the gift. Question of an easement is present to access the Hernandez property? Florio responded that the deed of 1926 provides right-of-way access to the Town Office and roller shed. Fall clarified that it is for access, not parking.

A resident of Burnham Road discusses access right-of-way to a neighboring property to hers on Burnham Road and stated it went away. If someone else purchases the Masonic Lodge will the Town Office lose its access? Fall explained that easements do not extinguish unless something has been done to terminate them. The issue is not the access, it is the parking that is not deeded. He adds that even the handicap ramp at the Town Office is on the Lodge's property and is there upon mutual agreement.

Zecher questions if the Town owns any property directly behind the Lodge, referring to the old kickball field. Babb responded that it owns a small part of it.

Daymond Steer questions if the Board of Selectmen can acquire the property without Town Meeting vote? Babb confirmed that authority has been granted through Town Meeting vote.

P. Elie questions the type and age of the heating system. Day responded it is an oil-fired furnace converted from a coal-fired system with a new burner. Fall added that it is a forced hot air system with one vent on each level.

Zecher questions if the foundation is sound? Fall confirmed. Dave Senecal noted that the building settled in 1927 and the baseboard was scribed onto the foundation as seen on the backside where a section is missing. Zecher questions if the Selectmen agree with the assessment. Florio responded that they cannot opine. Day stated that the building is sound and the ridgeline is straight.

Habif reviewed that if the building is acquired, the Masons have exclusive right to the second floor, but the downstairs can be used as a community space and can be fixed up to be used for that purpose. Babb responded that the use and repair would depend on warrant article approval; it would be up to the town to decide.

Maureen Elliott questions if all Board members are all in favor? Babb – yes, Day – yes, Florio not 100%; she understands the value but feels as though the town is taking on a responsibility in perpetuity. She refers to an agreement the Town of Effingham has since 1891 and how convoluted it is. Furthermore, she understands the cost but down the road she is looking at need due to its historical nature and what it will do for the town. Perhaps a new owner would be agreeable to allow access to the town office as it has maintained it in mutual respect for many years.

E. Rhymer questions if there are any restrictions on the downstairs renovations? Fall responded that there are not, only in the sanctuary/sacred space upstairs. The Masons want to retain their place in Freedom, and offer their gift to the town. Carroll Lodge cannot afford to upkeep the building or annual expenses any longer. The current real estate market presents an opportunity that cannot be passed up on if the transaction does not work out with the town and the option to list the property will be discussed at the next Lodge meeting on Thursday.

Habif question what happens 20-25 years down the road if the Lodge closes. Babb responded that the exclusive right to use is only in effect while Carroll Lodge's charter is in good standing.

Question on amount of use by the Lodge. Fall responded that they meet 10 times per year on the 4th Thursday and sometimes in special communication as needed.

Chuck Brooks clarified that tonight is hearing #1 and the second is scheduled for June 7, then a vote is to follow? Confirmed with the vote taking place no sooner than 7 days but less than 10-days following the second hearing.

Scully affirmed the positive support received at the meeting.

Zecher questions if the Town acquires, if improvements will have to wait for Town Meeting approval? Through Warrant Article? How much to spend down the road? Can it wait until summer for the decision? Many can assist with raising money to support the Lodge for a few more months until the decision can be made. Day responded that if the Town does not accept the offer, the property will go on the market. Florio added that is a good idea to not rush but it has been made clear that it will be sold if an agreement is not made.

Tabor states availability of grant funding so if the building is acquired, it will not be only up to the taxpayers to support for funding. Scully stated that the building is in the Registry of Historic Places at the state-level.

Steer questions if information on the acquisition is available online? White responded that the property assessment card, tax map and deed copies are available. The offer presented can be added as well.

E. Rhymer questions if the Town Attorney has been involved. Confirmed. Is Town Attorney aware of the lack of access to the Town Office? Susan Marks added that the public will not have access? Confirmed.

Marks questions how this will work? Babb responded that the public hearing is to gather information, the offer has been presented to the Planning Board and Conservation Commission for feedback, questions of

the public are asked, and follow up is necessary in order for the Board to make an informed decision. Babb hopes that it is favorable.

Habif questions if there is an opportunity to view the space. Fall stated he would be glad to open the building for a half hour.

P. Elie questions if the Planning Board or Conservation Commission expressed any concerns? Babb responded that the septic is in question and if there is any proximity to streams or wetlands. Additionally, questions regarding insurance? If a renter's policy is required? Is there a max dollar figure on amounts of repair? What will happen in a catastrophic event? The FCC questions presence of lead paint, asbestos, runoff and use of the building.

E. Rhymer questions if there will be answers to these questions at the next public hearing? Babb confirmed that they will work on them as well as amounts for repairs. Zecher followed up with a question as to whether the windows are adequate?

Fall expressed concern with insurance requirements. White was asked to contact Primex to verify what would be required for coverage.

An unidentified person spoke on the real estate market stating it is booming but not for this type of building on a hill with present issues, right-of-way and parking questions.

Scully stated the Heritage Commission has information on the building from 2012 when it was registered as a historical building. The 17-page document is available on the Town's website under Heritage Commission.

Marks questions what will happen if the Town does not accept? What will it do for parking for the Town Office? Florio responded that they are trying to look at all aspects/options to be responsible.

Jean Marshall stated that if you look at the map it is an incredible gathering of historic buildings, with the Towle cemetery and Roller Shed all in one location, all important to not forget.

Fall provided a history on the buildings stating the location was the former center of town.

Steer verified the crux of the issue is that Masons own the parking lot used by the Town Office. Day confirmed. Follow up was question of future use of the building? Response was community space, storage potential, and many other uses.

Being no further input, Babb closed the public hearing at 7:51 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Ellen White, Town Administrator

Approved by the Board of Selectmen on _____:

Leslie R. Babb

Ernest F. Day, Jr.

Melissa M. Florio