

# TOWN BUILDING EVALUATION COMMITTEE

## TOWN HALL REPORT

The following report is the work that has been done by the building Evaluation Committee which began with it's first meeting on November 5th 1994 and has been meeting on a weekly basis.

The first charge of the committee was to establish priorities using the town of Essex Access Survey and make recommendations to begin the work of bringing town owned buildings into compliance with ADA. The arrears of concern are access to public facilities, access to public programs, { town government } and access to restrooms. After evaluating each building, with the exception of the elementary school and the shipbuilding museum, recommendations were given to the board of selectman on all town owned buildings. Recommended work is already in the planning stages at the Public Safety Building, the Scout House and the Water Treatment Plant. The committee was then charged with evaluating conceivable options for town offices and to pursue the recommendation of this committee to construct a new town office building.

The Town Building Evaluation Committee has evaluated the Town Hall from two perspectives. The first is how the building is currently being used and how this use meets the needs of the town for office, meetings and library space. The second aspects handi capped accessibility and how making the building accessible affects current use.

At the present time the Town Hall houses the TOHP Burnham Library on part of the first floor and all the town offices in three offices on the first floor and four offices on the second floor. The exception is the DPW office which is being operated out of the Water Plant Building. The office space in Town Hall is not sufficient to serve our needs at the present time. The Board of Health office is tiny with barely space for the records which need to be kept. It will not be sufficient to house the additional computer equipment and records necessary to deal with our sewage issues. The health agent is forced to operate from a separate small office beside the stage which was formerly a dressing room. This arrangement is awkward and is not conducive to efficient operation of our Health Department.

The assessor's office is small, completely packed with computers, desks and files. The counter which makes it possible for people to access the maps and tax information books creates a narrow corridor between the door and the employee work area.

The town accountant's office is of sufficient size and is shared by a desk for the Building Inspector and his file cabinet.

The Selectmen office is the largest office. It houses the Selectmen secretary files and the towns copying machine. It formerly was utilized as the meeting room for public meetings and hearings of all Town boards. As a public meeting room it was woefully inadequate. While most meetings have few attenders, any controversial meeting or hearing drew numbers of people who wished to participate that far exceeded the room's capacity. The lack of proper seating made the room inhospitable and in the summer months the air conditioning was inadequate and too noisy. Board members and the public alike dreaded those meetings in 90 degree heat. Note that there is no office space provided for Con. Com., Planning Bd., Appeals Bd., Finance Com. and Personnel Bd.

In short, with the exception of the Town accountant's office, none of the offices are sufficient to meet the needs of the Town presently and they surely will not address our future needs.

The attorney general has ordered us to discontinue meeting in the Town Hall since it is not handi capped accessible consequently all public meetings are taking place at the Elementary School. This is an extreme inconvenience to the Town Boards. They try to anticipate which documents and files will be required at the meetings and have to haul these documents from Town Hall to the school. Frequently, something is overlooked or unanticipated making the meetings inefficient and frustrating.

If the Town wishes to continue to maintain it's offices in the Town Hall, all offices must eventually be made accessible. This will be a very daunting and expensive mission.

The Committee has evaluated several methods of making the building accessible. A ramp could be constructed which would give access to the first floor. This would not solve the problem of accessing the second floor. A chair lift up the current stairs is out of the question since such a lift would illegally restrict the stairs for public egress.

The committee has therefore determined that the most efficient, architecturally responsible and cost effective method of providing access to both floors is a handicapped access elevator preferably located at the front of the building with the shaft requiring approximately 25 sq. ft. in the library reading room to access the first floor and would take the Board of Health office to access the second floor.

Clearly this solution would further diminish our office and library space. Furthermore, all the doors in the second floor offices would need to be enlarged and replaced. The assessors office would need to be rearranged to provide wheelchair access to the employee area and the counter lowered. With the current office size, this would be practically impossible.

The new restrooms on the second floor are not accessible and at least one of them needs considerable modifications in order to accomplish this, including enlarging the entrance door, removing the stall dividers and replacing the vanity with a handicapped accessible sink.

The committee evaluated the option of removing the present petitions and completely restructuring the 2nd floor area to provide more office space. This could only be accomplished by removing the stage and utilizing that space as offices.

This was discounted for several reasons including that major structural work lowering the library ceiling would be necessary causing serious disruption to the library during construction and the space gained by this would not be sufficient to provide an adequate meeting room. Furthermore, this would cause the permanent ruination of the Town Hall Auditorium as constructed and the committee felt that this action would be abhorred and resisted by not only local historians and Town Hall fans but by state officials as well.

After evaluating all conceivable options that currently present themselves, the committee has concluded the Town Hall can not possibly provide us with the space that we need to adequately house town offices and a meeting room of sufficient size to ensure full public participation in town government which we see as mandatory.

Past committees have explored the possibility of additions to the Town Hall or renovation of the basement to provide for additional space. These options have been proven to be costly due to the architecture and historic nature of the building combined with the challenging site restrictions.

It is therefore the committee's recommendation that the town proceed swiftly to investigate the option of constructing a completely new building on a site separate from the town hall. This building should be constructed as simply and inexpensively as possible with adequate space for our present and foreseeable office and meeting room needs. If this building could be constructed on two levels with the ground or cellar level dedicated to the Police department we could address two pressing town needs with one solution and provide both solutions at a cost much less than that of addressing them separately.

With the town offices subsequently removed from Town Hall, the library could be allowed to expand into the entire first floor which the Library Trustees have stated would satisfy their space needs for the foreseeable future.

The current offices on the second floor could be removed and the Auditorium restored to its original purpose and beauty with funds currently available and dedicated for that purpose. The building could also be made accessible with some of those funds. The hall could then once again be used for town meetings and community functions.

The committee has evaluated all parcels of town owned land in search of a possible site for this new Town office and Police building. With the exception of a 1.7 acre parcel of land abutting John Wise Ave. and the cemetery, all other town owned land has been ruled out as either too remote or not buildable. We recommend that the John Wise Ave site be further investigated. We considered the possibility of taking an appropriate piece of land by eminent domain however we feel that this process would be costly and lengthy and would unreasonably delay progress. Furthermore, few privately owned parcels seemed appropriate. If the John Wise Ave site is deemed desirable, we need to move expeditiously with our plans because the State D.P.W. plans to pave Rt. 133 in the summer of 1995 and following the paving project a five year moratorium on opening the road for water and gas services will be in effect.

### A bit of history about the Town Hall

Dedicated on February 15, 1894

Architect Frank G. Weston

Contractors Baker and Dodge

Building Committee

L.G. Burnham

Frank C. Richardson

F. E. Burnham

George Lufkin

Daniel Poland

The Town Hall and Library were dedicated on February 15, 1894 with exercises conducted in the afternoon and evening. The program opened with invocation by Rev Warred F. Low and closed with benediction. Speeches were delivered and poetry read. The evening segment consisted of a musical. "It was quite a shin dig."

A bequest in the will of Thomas Oliver Hazard Perry Burnham made it possible to build the Town Hall and Library. Mr. Burnham was born in Boston in 1814. He was named after Commodore Thomas Oliver Hazard Perry who was the hero at the naval battle on Lake Erie in the War of 1812.

Frank Weston was the architect who came up with the design of this unique building. Barker and Dodge were the contractors. The acceptance of the building by the town was executed by the chairman of the Board of Selectmen, Enoch B. Kimball.

The location of the Town Hall and Library was a very contentious issue. The folks in the center of Essex wanted the building in their area, while the citizens of South Essex

thought it should be located east of the old Essex Shipyards because Addison Cogswell offered to give the town land where the "old drug store now stands."

Emotions ran high and tempers were short and there was enough name calling to go around. The Essex Center people went so far that on the night of the vote a horse and buggy was sent to the home of a recluse, near the cemetery, to fetch him to cast his vote.

Essex center won out and the Town Hall was constructed where Henry O. Wade's brick yard manufacturing concern was located.

The Town Hall quickly became the center of true cultural and social activities of the community while serving as the seat of town government. In addition to town meetings, many other functions were held in the hall. Drama and classical music by composers such as Franz Joseph Hayden were performed adding to the fulfillment of life in Essex. The cost of all this ranged from thirty-five cents to one dollar. In later years, Essex became well known for the minstrel shows at the Town Hall.

Saturday afternoon and evening movies were a favorite activity for its citizens. Graduation exercises were held at the Town Hall for many years. Memorial day observances were held here from the GAR Veterans to Dessert Storm.

The Town Hall has been designated as a national historic sight and in that light, it would be desirable and appropriate to restore the building to what it once was. Whether this can be achieved is problematical in the light of today's financial picture. We can all hope.

#### From the Town Report 1966

For over a quarter of a century the library has been requesting that the portion of their premises borrowed by the Selectmen, and used by this board and the Water department for office space be returned to them as it has been badly needed. Conditions this year forced action on this matter as the Welfare Department could no longer carry on its work in the cramped and inadequate quarters which they occupied. Since they pay well, (from State and Federal funds) for the town space they occupy, it became mandatory that proper action be taken if the values of having all town departments possible within the Town Hall were to be maintained. Location of the new offices became a highly controversial matter with justified sentimentality playing an important part.

The board surveyed every possibility. Together with the Welfare Department, and other departments which would be involved, many suggestions were explored. We found that the building of an addition on the present Town Hall would be far too expensive. We found that the conversion of the cellar into offices would be inadequate. We found that

rearranging the present office space was next to an impossibility, and still would not furnish the necessary room. So, it became a public necessity that Essex should do exactly what so many other towns in the Commonwealth have done, which is to convert the Town Hall Auditorium into office space, and hold its town meetings and similar public gatherings at the new school auditorium.

Plans were carefully made and placed before the Finance Committee. Their approval was unanimous. On August 18th, a special town meeting approved the transfer of seven thousand dollars from available funds for this purpose. The work was put out to bids with the low bidder a local builder, who later had to be excused from the contract for personal reasons. Since the original bid was approximately twenty-nine hundred dollars lower than the second bid it was necessary to go before the second special town meeting which was held on December 7th, for approval to transfer another twenty nine hundred dollars (approximately) from available funds for this purpose. This was done and the contract let, with the result that the Selectmen, Welfare Department, Water Department and the police department all have fine offices at the Town Hall, where they belong. The Town Treasurer now has adequate space to store his records, and quarters available for his use. The Library Trustees now have their reading room back at their disposal. Thus, a full half-dozen emergencies were solved by the construction of the new offices. We are giving great space to this matter because there was so much interest, and so many departments involved.

As can be seen from this 1966 report history repeats itself. Today we find ourselves in a similar situation.