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Creative Approaches to Recycling Buildings

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At some point in the life of a municipality, there are questions that councils and selectmen find particularly delicate. Do we need to expand the town hall (or fire station, or highway garage), and if so, should we build new or try to adapt what we already have? Is there an existing building that could suit our needs or should we start from scratch? What about ties to the past? Energy efficiency? Convenience and access? Security and parking?

Considering all the factors that go into these town-changing decisions, it's little wonder that it often takes years, or even decades, to come to decisions and conclusions. This month, the *Townsman* looks at six communities that recently faced, or are still facing important decisions about what to do with their municipal buildings, examining creative ways that existing municipal resources can be "recycled," amid a new moment of austerity for most annual budgets.

New Cony, Old Cony

Discussions about municipal buildings, however heated, are usually heard solely within the community. A long-running battle over the Cony High School site in Augusta, however, spilled over into the courts, and included two trips to the Maine Supreme Court before finally being concluded.

Descendants of Daniel Cony, who two centuries ago provided the land on what is now Cony Circle for a public high school, were ultimately unsuccessful in convincing the courts that the city should be barred from selling part of the site for a Hannaford supermarket. The "new" wing of the "old" Cony has now been demolished; the city's new high school, retaining the old name, opened a mile up Cony Street in September 2006.

Now attention turns to another portion of the old East Side campus – the iconic Flatiron Building, one of the most recognizable school buildings in Maine. Constructed in 1921, it conforms to the triangular site between Cony and Stone streets in much the same way as buildings in Manhattan and other major cities.

From the beginning, the city was determined to preserve the Flatiron even as it was eager to see the substandard, 1970s section of the old high school removed from the site.

"This is not just any old building," said City Manager Bill Bridgeo, who said the city council has been "very supportive" of finding new uses for the Flatiron, even while recognizing it might take time.

"The first idea people had was to make it an arts center, to include theater and art and music," Bridgeo said. As a stand-alone proposition, this proved unrealistic. "Those uses don't generally produce much revenue on their own," he said. "It didn't look like it would be a viable project long-term."

Part of the enthusiasm came from city residents who've attended events for generations in the third-floor auditorium, a venue that had all the glamour the pedestrian-looking auditorium in the 1970s-wing lacked. Like most such halls, however, the auditorium didn't meet modern safety or fire codes.

"Depending on how you figure, seating could be 200 up to the 1,000 they used to pack in there," Bridgeo said. It is still not clear whether the auditorium, historic as it is, can be part of a new project.

So the city council appointed a “very capable” study committee, Bridgeo said, which met for a year and produced a report that found no front-runner among possible new uses. The city has also appropriated \$60,000 for consultants, and it currently working with Barba Architects of Portland and Planning Decisions of Hallowell on the reuse question.

What comes next is probably an open-ended request for proposals (RFP) that should be a good test of what marketable concepts there are. “We aren’t saying we’re going to accept a proposal, or that it will be the whole answer,” Bridgeo said. “The council has been quite clear that this building will be preserved.”

There is some urgency, however. Bridgeo said that it cost \$65,000 to maintain and heat the building last year, a figure that could rise sharply this winter. “The sense is that we’d like to have a plan in hand this summer, and not have to maintain it more than another year,” he said.

Armory to City Hall?

While Augusta is trying to determine what to do with a large old school building, South Portland has acquired a similarly sizable structure downtown to meet some of its future building needs, even though it doesn’t have a specific plan yet.

In 2006, the city acquired the old National Guard Armory, built in 1941-42, which lies between existing city buildings devoted to police, fire and dispatch services. The building had been mothballed by the Guard in 1994 after a major water line break, and plans to convert it to a glass and ceramic museum failed when the sponsors filed for bankruptcy.

“At the time there was a lot of attention to homeland security, and we realized the existing site wasn’t all that secure,” said City Manager Jim Gailey. Purchasing the Armory, for \$600,000, seemed a prudent way of protecting vital services and offering possibilities for other city departments.

“The city council has been clear since 1994 that the residential zoning for the area wouldn’t change,” Gailey said. “They didn’t want commercial uses to extend across Broadway, so that limited what could be done with the building.”

Like Augusta, South Portland took a year to study possible uses, and came up with two favorites: a new city hall, or a new public library. Gailey favors the first option, after it became clear that there wasn’t enough room for both functions.

But money is tight at the moment, and there’s no move at this point to take on the large-scale project that would be needed to overhaul the whole complex. Instead, the council appears inclined to move the planning and economic development departments – currently in rented space – to what was the administrative area of the Armory, which could be easily converted. “The building is quite sound,” said Gailey. “The engineers who’ve looked at it said it was in better shape than they expected, considering its age.”

Since the city is now spending \$56,000 a year on rent, renovations for those departments should pay for themselves relatively quickly. The assessor’s office – now in a separate building across the parking lot from city hall – could also move to the Armory.

A phase 2 project could move the other departments now in city hall to the Armory sometime in the next five to eight years, Gailey said. The old drill hall would become a two-story space so the whole building would provide between 38,000-42,000 square feet. That would not only expand floor space from the current 24,000 square feet, but also offer an opportunity to create a far more energy-efficient environment that also functions better for city business. The current city hall, a former Methodist Church with a poorly built 1970s wing added, has outlived its usefulness, Gailey said.

In addition to the outlying departments, the city would like to move its Emergency Operations Center – now in the basement of the dispatch center – to the Armory’s second floor to keep

clear of flood tides. And the school superintendent's office could also be accommodated, consolidating another city-owned building.

"It will be good to get everything back under one roof," said the city manager. "We think we can serve the public better this way."

Old School to Town Office

It doesn't necessarily take a lot of money to make over a building. Dover-Foxcroft appears to be getting a bargain in its new town hall, which will soon occupy the old Morton Avenue School.

The school became surplus when SAD 68, based in Dover-Foxcroft, received state funding for a new K-4 elementary school, built as a separate 53,000 square foot building adjacent to the SeDoMoCha Middle School (the name refers to the school district's four member towns, Sebec, Dover-Foxcroft, Monson and Charleston). Most of the district's students – 700 in all – are now on the same campus. SAD 68 also maintains a small elementary school in Monson, while most high school students attend privately administered Foxcroft Academy. An elementary school in Charleston closed in 2004.

After the school district received approval from the State Board of Education in December 2004 for the new school, the SAD 68 board notified Dover-Foxcroft that it would return the Morton Avenue School, as well as the superintendent's office located in another old school on Mayo Street, to the town at no cost.

Town Manager Jack Clukey said that the town indicated it had an interest in reusing the Morton Avenue School but intended to seek bids for the superintendent's office. The buildings were vacated last September, and the Mayo Street building was sold to Mayo Regional Hospital for \$185,000. It is now being renovated for a substance abuse treatment clinic that will not include methadone maintenance.

Since the Morton Avenue project has a budget of just \$65,000, the town would appear to be getting a good deal. But Clukey points out that the renovations have a leisurely timeline and are being done with donated labor – from inmates of the Charleston Correctional Center.

"All we've had to pay for is materials and supplies, plus some plumbing. We didn't have a deadline, and we're very pleased with the quality of the work," he said. "But it's taken more time, and a lot of management on our part that would usually be the job of the general contractor."

Occupancy for the town will come sometime this summer, and employees are pleased, Clukey said. Moving in with the other town offices will be the water department, now at a separate location. The building offers 10,000-12,000 feet of usable space – nearly double what's available in the current location.

The project leaves only one remaining question – what to do with the current town hall, an impressive two-story white-clapboarded structure that is a keystone to downtown. The town will likely seek a National Historic Register designation for the building, and then consider its options.

No Consolidation

Sometimes, keeping existing buildings isn't the first choice. Winthrop selectmen proposed consolidating public safety functions in a single complex on Route 202, away from existing downtown locations. The first, \$4 million bond issue for the project was turned down by the voters, and so was the second, for a scaled-down, \$2.8 million version.

At that point, said Town Manager Cornell Knight, it was back to the drawing board. What's emerged is a \$1.8 million plan that will keep the police station downtown, purchase a former medical center building for the regional ambulance service, which serves six towns, and provide funds for a new or reconfigured fire station.

While the pricetag was an obvious concern for voters, Knight said, there were also questions about what would happen to the handsome, sandstone-fronted municipal building that occupies a prominent place on Main Street and dates to the 1820s. "History was a factor, and support for downtown, too," Knight said.

While basically sound, the building will be gutted to better serve police functions; other town offices had moved next door to join the school superintendent in 2004, after a new high school was built.

The fire station, on a separate site, may offer some challenges, since it's on a "postage stamp lot" with inadequate parking. "At one time, firefighters responded directly to the fire, but now that they come to the station, space is pretty tight," the town manager said.

While the town will keep its historic home and probably save some money, the arrangement will be operationally less efficient, Knight said. "It would have been nice to have one training room, and where people could cover for each other," he added. "But service to the public should remain at the same level."

History First

Orrington has spent the last three town meetings debating what to do about its 1871 town hall, and in early June came up with the answer – town departments will stay put, the town hall will be renovated at a cost of \$125,000, and the selectmen's meetings, and voting, will move to the elementary school.

Town Manager Carl Young said that the first two town meeting discussions were attempts to focus on what to do. The latest provided clear alternatives – a "ranch style" single-story town office on a new site, for \$600,000, or the renovations, at less than one-quarter the price.

But the financial difference didn't determine the outcome, Young said. "The town has put away plenty of money. We could have built new for cash," he said.

Instead, discussion focused on the existing town hall, a notable building designed by a prominent architect and built when Ulysses S. Grant was president. In his two and a half years as town manager, since moving from the Eastport assessor's office, Young has become quite a fan of the building's history and traditions. "There were so many presidential elections here. Just about every person associated with Orrington can be recognized within these walls," he said.

On the other hand, the building is hardly functional from a contemporary standpoint. "We have no security at all," he said. "We have an \$8.8 million budget [including the school] and lots of cash on hand. It's not like the old days, when this was a public building and people went in and out. Professionals do their work here now, and the needs are different."

Young told selectmen, on behalf of the staff, that the only way the town hall could still be adequate was if the central meeting room was vacated and remodeled. "The various offices were crammed around the perimeter, and there really isn't enough room for people to do their jobs," he said.

So while the selectmen will move over to the school, Young seems pleased that the town offices will stay. "We'll lose some of the history when the partitions and Sheetrock go up," he said, "but we're going to keep as much as we can. We're putting up pictures of all the town clerks we can find, to remind people this town's been here a long time."

Factory to Community Center

Some old buildings are saved even when there seemed little chance of that happening. In Farmington, the old Fairbanks School got a new lease on life after a destructive fire. The fire, in 2002, had forced the closure of a business, MTE, that had been occupying the old school, and

the town also determined it had no need for the building, though it still owned the property, according to Town Manager Richard Davis.

The old wood-framed building has no architectural distinction but is an integral part of the neighborhood. So the Fairbanks Neighborhood Association rolled up its sleeves and got to work, landing a \$260,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture that is speeding up renovations.

A food bank already occupies the first floor, and a commercial kitchen is being constructed that can be leased by catering businesses. The association also hopes to rent office space and host recreation programs on site.

The town has no financial investment in the project, Davis said, but the planning board gave its blessing after determining it was a suitable use. A 99-year lease should provide continuity. "It's a benefit not only to the neighborhood, but for the entire town as well," he said.