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## Communities face tough decisions on town halls

In 2001 when Ashland town leaders wanted to demolish the nearly 150-year-old Town Hall, Julie Nardone and other history lovers led a campaign to save it.

“They were just going to tear it down and replace it with a brick imposter,” said Nardone, who now serves on the town’s Historical Commission. “We’re New England and our brand is history and antiques.”

She and the others succeeded in convincing officials and fellow townspeople to instead renovate the building and maintain its historic character. A \$4 million overhaul made the building more functional and professional, but preserved features such as the original oak staircase and jail cell bars from the old police lockup downstairs.

“You’re in there and you’re walking up the same stairs that the people that founded the town were walking up,” Nardone said.

Many towns in the MetroWest and the Milford area are dealing with aging town halls, with some now debating whether to embark on costly renovations, build new or even move their seats of democracy into modern office buildings.

For some communities, the cost of keeping up these grand dames can be daunting.

Framingham is now hoping to sell its 88-year-old Memorial Building to MassBay Community College to solve a space crunch and avoid making more than \$20 million in needed improvements.

Hopedale and Sudbury are both mulling options for their deteriorating town halls. Upton just completed a top-to-bottom renovation, while Westborough is undertaking one now.

“It was time,” Westborough Town Manager Jim Malloy said. “We had electrical problems. We’d had electrical fires in the building. We couldn’t turn certain things on or it would blow the breaker panel. ... The heating system barely worked. ... The building was barely functional from an accessibility point of view.”

In fact, the town had to cordon off the top two stories of the building to comply with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act because the levels weren’t accessible to all.

As part of an extensive \$8 million renovation, Westborough is gutting the whole building, replacing an original 1929 furnace, ripping out the radiators in all the offices and installing an elevator and new electric, plumbing and heating systems.

The town considered moving into new space before deciding to stay, Malloy said.

“We looked at leasing a new office building that has been built but hadn’t been fitted out yet, and there were sentiments that we should stay with our town hall, it’s in the middle of Main Street and that’s where we should be,” he said.

Seeing it as a solution to their own town hall problems, Framingham selectmen voted in October to offer to sell the Memorial Building to MassBay.

The vote came after Framingham conducted a long-range building study that found it would cost \$24 million to carry out needed improvements at the town hall, including for a new office annex and repairs to the building envelope and exterior masonry. Built in 1926 as a memorial to the town’s veterans, the stately Renaissance-style building is home to Nevins Hall and has town offices on all three levels.

If MassBay accepts the town’s proposal, Framingham says it would look for a new place downtown to house both town offices and the School Department administration.

“The long-range goal is combining the school administration in the same physical space with the town administration so we can work closer together and share resources,” selectmen Chairman Charlie Sisitsky said.

That’s what Franklin accomplished when it bought and renovated a medical office building in 2003 and moved in both its town offices and the school administration.

The town merged two cultures and created a stronger team, Town Administrator Jeff Nutting said. “By way of example, the superintendent and I share a wall,” he said.

While the Franklin Municipal Building isn’t a traditional town hall, it has its perks.

“It’s modern, it’s clean, it’s functional,” Nutting said. “We have a drive-(up) window to pay your taxes.”

Hopedale and Sudbury are among the towns now trying to figure out what to do with their deteriorating town halls.



Hopedale Building Inspector Bob Speroni looks out auditorium windows at Hopedale Town Hall that are all covered in ripped and deteriorating plastic. Daily News Staff Photo / Allan Jung

Hopedale Town Meeting rejected a proposed \$6.8 million renovation, and residents also shot down a plan to move town hall into an empty mansion across from the high school.

Town Coordinator Steven Sette said the town is working on some smaller urgent projects - including replacement of its oil-burning boiler with a gas-fired unit - as it continues to try to build support for a major investment.

"I think the most important thing is we need to be considerate and respectful for what taxpayers can afford, but at the same time the town hall is really the first impression that you want to make" on prospective new residents and businesses, Sette said.

Over the years Hudson has invested in renovations to its historic French Second Empire-style town hall, which it built for just under \$50,000 in 1872.

The town is now working on estimates for repairs to the exterior.

The town brought the interior back with three renovations over the past 20 years, installed an elevator, made other accessibility improvements and preserved the historic character.

"At this point the building's beautiful and we keep it beautiful," Hudson Community Development Director Michelle Ciccolo said.

The building is full of history: In its early days, it was home to the police station, town jail and a community bank. Older residents who remember having their school dances at the town hall appreciated the care the town has taken with renovations.

The community expressed "this incredible sort of thank-you for not destroying this building when we brought it back to life," Ciccolo said.

"You realize how important these buildings are to the community fabric," she said.

Anthony Schiavi started as Ashland town manager more than a decade after that town's big debate over whether to demolish town hall.

"I'm glad they didn't do that," he said. "The historical significance of this building is tremendous."

Preserved in the renovation was a rosette on the ceiling on the second floor, an antique safe door on display in the selectmen's boardroom and the old jail cell bars downstairs.

"The kids love getting their pictures taken in front of the jail cell," Schiavi said.

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