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New Library Building Planning

Discussion Paper for Abbott Library Trustees

Article 25 was passed by the voters on March 9 instructing the Library Trustees to find other site(s) for a new library and bring them to the voters for approval. We have received a clear instruction from the voters and are duty bound (though perhaps not legally required) to act. The first two board meeting of the new board (March and April) passed with no mention of Article 25 or sites for a new building. It is time we address the issue and decide what to do.

Any new library building effort will have to go before the voters and this will have to be done at a regular Town Meeting in March. This in turn requires that preliminarily planning is complete and warrant articles are drafted by December of this year or any subsequent year. Can we be ready with plans and warrant articles by December 2010? Assume we push to make this happen and the voters approve in March 2011 and we allow two years for fundraising and one year for construction, we would move into our new library in March 2014 about four years from now.

Where to put the new library is the question on which we have stubbed our collective toes three times so far. How do we avoid doing this yet another time? How do we find a location on which a significant majority of the voters can agree? Twice we have done a careful analysis of all alternatives and ranked possible sites by what we hoped were objective criteria. In each case we chose sites on which a bare majority of the voters could agree only to have our plans derailed later. How do we avoid doing this again? The answer probably does not lie in yet another “objective” ranking of all possible sites.

Looking at the votes on library issues from 2003 to 2010 it is clear that library location issues (positive or negative) do not win by many votes. Ski Tow Hill had a plurality of 60 votes and was reversed by 15; the Harbor Hotel site had a margin of 15 votes and was reversed by 20; and the expansion to Old Town Hall lost by 87 votes. All of these results with between 800 and 900 people voting and no location ever won or lost by more than 87 votes. There was never solid agreement on any site. The town is divided on the issue of library location no matter which of the nearly 20 sites that have been suggested is put forward. The answer does not lie in going back to previous sites and reselling them, rather the answer lies in finding the one new site that is most acceptable to the most voters.

One proposal is to expand the present library building on its present site by buying the adjacent lot and adding to the present building. This proposal has a great deal of political appeal and may remove the contentious location issue from the equation. It is not a perfect solution and it has

some drawbacks but it is likely to be achievable while many other seemingly more perfect alternatives are less likely to win voter approval.

On the downside, the Expand in Place concept will result in a library with limited additional space, limited additional parking, some serious design challenges in tying the two buildings together and a less than ideal flow through the two buildings. The construction of the new building would be disruptive to operations in the present library. The primary appeal of this proposal is that it is likely to be saleable to voters who at this point are less than wildly enthusiastic about any new library concept.

A second proposal is to purchase the land adjacent to Route 11 that sits between Sunapee Center and the Town Garage which is currently owned by the Claremont Savings Bank. This roughly three acre parcel offers a number of attractive features: It is more than enough land for a 10,000 square foot library with plenty of room for parking and future expansion if that should be necessary. It is reasonably level land with water, sewer and electricity nearby. The lot, with an excellent view of Mount Sunapee, is bounded by Route 11, the Town Garage, the Sunapee Center Building and the Gallup Farm. Since it sits on the School-side of Route 11 it overcomes the oft cited-disadvantage of requiring school children to cross Route 11 to reach the library.

The downsides here are the cost of the land (negotiations would have to be held with the bank), the likelihood of ledge on the property and the fact that it is yet another new proposal. It might be harder to sell to the town voters than the Expand in Place concept but it would likely result in a superior library building.

There are still too many uncertainties with both proposals to reach any definitive conclusions but both seem appropriate to pursue. The Trustees should move ahead with studies to flesh out both proposals with an eye toward making a decision in the fall that would result in a specific proposal to the Town voters with warrant articles in March 2011.

Specifically, studies would include preliminary discussions with the landowners of both sites to establish possible land costs, discussions with architects to develop some preliminary sketches and some initial cost estimates. In addition, a detailed analysis of pros and cons of each site should be developed and opinions solicited from a meaningful sample of voters. Since both sites involve negotiations with land owners it is important that information about our plans remain closely held until we are further along. For this reason, the meeting at which this will be discussed will be closed to the public.

If we make a decision to proceed at the May meeting, we could be ready to choose between the two sites (or both sites) at the August meeting leading to an appropriate set of plans, cost estimates and warrant articles by December and hopefully, a new library by March 2014.