

A Short Grange Timeline

December 14, 1998 “Bridgewater Grange #153, Patrons of Husbandry” for “no consideration” hands over the Grange property to the Town with one condition on a Quit Claim Deed:

“The Town of Bridgewater, by the acceptance hereof, agrees to allow the Bridgewater Grange No. 153 use of the building from time to time for regularly scheduled and special Grange meetings and activities, so long as its charter is in good standing, it being understood that said use shall be at the sole discretion of the Board of Selectmen of the Town of Bridgewater.”

April 11, 2001 Mary Allen (Town Historian) warns at a Selectmen meeting that the Bridgewater Historical Society voted not to support the state’s nomination of the Bridgewater Center Historic District for listing on the National Registry, **“because there would be a lot of ramifications”**. The Selectmen agreed to write a letter of dissent, but the Town was notified by June that it was already accepted. The Grange itself was described in the registry as “a long clapboard two story building, it has Greek Revival doorways at each end.” The Town never formed a Local Historic District Commission which could manage paint colors and such and soon forgot about the whole matter.

This designation meant that the CT Historic Commission had jurisdiction to prevent any “unwarranted destruction” of the 61 contributing buildings within the historic district. The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) currently contends there is significant interest to preserve/renovate the Grange structure and that the newly formed Bridgewater Preservation Association (BPA) now has the financial capacity and expertise to carry out the state’s preservation mission. The BPA is a pending non-profit and seems to be comprised entirely of Grange members of which only a few are actually farmers or folks from Bridgewater.

1999-2016 The Town replaces the heating system, roof and repaints the exterior of the Grange. It also pays for all utilities and maintenance. Almost all use is by the Grange membership at no charge.

2013 - 2014 A new Board of Selectmen is elected in 2013. Selectman Null, the Danbury Building Inspector, initiates a detailed review of Grange structural problems. We receive a structural engineer’s report detailing serious issues:

“Overstress, cracking, sagging, local failure, and framing and building movement have occurred. Based on observed conditions and preliminary load calculations, every framing member in the building should be strengthened or replaced in order to meet current Building Code requirements.”

“The foundation for the Grange was built to a standard that was below what was common for that time. This was most likely because the building was not provided with a basement..... **Since a new foundation is required and the framing must be fully sistered and strengthened, it is worthwhile to consider replacing the building.**”

2015 At Town Meeting citizens allocate \$100,000 from the Harris Fund to enable Selectmen to retain experts, perform studies and research options. We talked to Episcopal Church Diocese re: water & septic sharing, sought grant opportunities, hired an architect and identified costs with each option.

The Grange building has capacity restrictions. Inside dimensions are only 55' X 24' = 1,320 sq. ft. **In a renovation design** without an addition or basement requires space for stairways, kitchen, two handicap bathrooms, utility room, closets, etc., **the actual meeting area would be about 400 sq. ft. or enough space for max 44 people with tables and chairs or 66 sitting.**

With help from an historic architect a new structure to maximize space was designed having a basement for utilities and storage, a shed addition on west side for kitchen and bathrooms, but no second floor (1& ½ stories). **An expanded Town design allows for 133 people with tables and chairs and 200 sitting.**

2016 At the Annual Town Meeting citizens vote to give authority to Board of Selectmen to build new or renovate a Community Center/Grange and set aside additional capital funds (\$312,000).

Asbestos in window caulk and lead paint throughout was documented. Three estimates were received for demolition (~\$35,000). We completed an A-2 Survey (<1/2 acre). The building was closed for use due to concerns by the Fire Marshall, our insurance company facilities inspector, and a **“Notice of an Unsafe Structure” issued by our building inspector.**

In September of 2016 the Town hired a contractor to remove the underground oil tank at the northwest corner of the Grange. The tank had been abandoned for many years, but had leaked in the past. The underground spillage was removed except for an area under the rubble foundation which would have destabilized the building further. **It was determined that excavation of the remaining oil saturated soil would be best accomplished if the structure was removed soon. There is ongoing environmental liability due to the risk of contamination to the St. Mark's Church and Bistro wells nearby.**

2017-18 – SHPO's representative, Todd Levine, met with the Selectmen and said there could be significant local interest in preserving the Grange. He then met with Lisa Burns and others to encourage a petition drive. If they got 100 signatures from Bridgewater, the State would put a stay on Town plans to build a new building on the same site. They barely succeeded with an emotional pitch. The Selectmen recognized that our plans were now on hold and cooperated with SHPO and the CT Trust for Historic Preservation to cost share (\$4,255) for a technical

assistance grant to pay Crosskey Architects to develop a detailed renovation plan for basing more accurate estimates.

The state plans were unsatisfactory for the same reasons as the current BPA plans. There was not enough space for town meetings and community functions. The costs were too high and the estimates were inaccurate. The plans also leave the known oil contamination in the ground, and lead paint to be encapsulated.

The Selectmen rejected the renovation option again. We notified the state in March of 2018 that we were ready to carefully take down the structure, salvage usable wood for re-use and clean up the oil saturated soil to prepare the site for a new building. The State threatened legal action and asked the Town representatives to appear before the CT Historic Commission in Hartford. The Town presented its case as did the Grange preservationists. The commission voted to stop potential destruction in hopes that a financially viable group would emerge that could renovate the Grange with the Town's blessings.

2019-20 -The Town was legally restrained by the CT Attorney General's office. We began to seriously look at other designs and alternate locations for a new useful meeting house building near the Library or even at the Hilltop Center.

We also told the state that all research and work to renovate the Grange would now be at the State's expense. They commissioned another structural report, more architectural plans and an estimate from La Rosa Construction out of Meriden. **Their final renovation estimate was \$1,227,310 and did not include a septic system, nor new siding, plumbing and windows. Since that estimate, the price of structural materials has more than doubled and labor has also gone up. The La Rosa estimate is no longer valid and should be revised significantly upwards.**

2021 The Town was awarded a CT Small Town Economic Assistance Program (STEAP) grant for \$100,000 to demolish the Grange, excavate the oil contamination and develop detailed plans for a new building on the same site. The only contingency is that the CT Historic Commission and Att'y General's office would have to allow this to happen.

The State and BPA group are insisting on a simple **"Yes" or "No" vote** to sell the Town's asset with appropriate conditions for \$1.00. We presume a "No" vote would enable the Town to control the future of our own property and release the State's prohibition against demolition. The Selectmen's overall concerns are that the BPA is underfunded and inexperienced managing construction projects. We risk handing over a chain linked blight situation that could become worse if the building collapses or takes forever to renovate. We could get stuck for seven more years with a big historic headache and potential liability. Even if the BPA could accomplish their plan, it won't really serve the Town's needs for a Meeting House. It will only benefit a handful of Grange members from Bridgewater and neighboring towns.

At the Town Meeting on Thursday, May 20th, the Bridgewater voters and taxpayers voted by paper ballot to?