

Grange Update from Curtis Read, First Selectman

(sent out as town-wide email, on website & Facebook)

Bridgewater recently requested bids to take down the Grange structure in the town center as the next step in order to build a new “Grange” community center. However, we have been delayed in selecting a contractor because we must get pre-approval from the CT Historic Preservation Office (state). That delay is in response to a misleading petition against demolition that was recently circulated and submitted to the state.

Since 2000, Bridgewater center has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places as a “Local Historic District”. The Grange is considered one of the sixty-one “contributing buildings” within this designation. The state, working with the non-profit CT Trust for Historic Preservation, has to make every effort to evaluate that the Town has adequately considered “feasible and prudent alternatives” (renovation) as opposed to the demolition of the existing Grange structure. Their default preference is always the renovation option. This is not our preferred choice for several critical reasons:

1. The Grange structure is documented to be in poor condition. Any renovation process would be dangerous and costly. Estimates range from \$1.6 to 1.8 million. Almost every component from the foundation to the roof would have to be replaced. We also want to remove the asbestos and peeling lead paint as soon as possible. The process is labor intensive, and CT prevailing wage rates (labor surcharge of ~30%) may have to be added to existing renovation proposals. If renovated, the old building would essentially be all new while costing twice as much as a new building.
2. Significant heating oil contamination remains under the Grange since a tank removal in 2016. This liability should be removed sooner than later. Bridgewater has two CT listed public water supply wells, one at the Village Store/Bistro and the other at St. Mark’s Church that could be affected by migrating oil. Up to 10 ft. depth of soil may have to be excavated from under the north end of the Grange. This work would be very difficult and expensive in a renovation scenario. Excavation could further destabilize the existing foundation. If the Grange is removed first, this work could happen quickly, efficiently and reasonably. Any delay in taking care of this known environmental hazard would be irresponsible and increase the Town’s financial exposure.
3. The Grange was also condemned in May, 2016 by our building official for good reasons. We have had expert reviews from structural engineers and our town’s insurance company. They have all written about the dangerous conditions like the bowed walls, cracked foundation and lack of supports, etc. Last week our insurance company has recently removed Grange building coverage from the Town policy. They have instructed us to install a chain link/construction fence around the Grange perimeter if we are not permitted by the state to proceed with the demolition and replacement option this fall. The fence could remain an eyesore for a long time awaiting us to secure at least a million dollars in a combination of tax credits and grants to pay for renovation. This will not help our town image or property values.

To summarize: We already have demolition and re-build bids that would cost under one million dollars. It would be easier, faster, and have less financial risks due to overruns without prevailing wage labor rates. It is the responsible option we have arrived at after four years of research and meetings.

In the Annual Town meeting on May 20, 2016 a motion was passed “to authorize the expenditure and approve the transfer of \$312,000 from the Town’s General Fund Reserve Account into the Capital Expenditures Fund for a newly constructed Community Center (Grange).” This passed by a vote of 106-yes to 27-no. We already had \$100,000 Harris Fund capital approved by Town Meeting in May, 2015.

It is my hope that the CT Historic Preservation Board will decide to give us a green light to proceed. It is common sense and makes financial sense for our taxpayers in Bridgewater. Otherwise, our residents and visitors will all be looking at construction fence in our beautiful town center for possibly two or more years.

I would welcome any comments via e-mail to cread@bridgewaterhall.org.

Demolition/Rebuild E-Mail Comments from 8/21 – 8/24/18

Supporting Comments

1. Nicely stated. Seems like a no-brainer to me. Thank you for your hard work.
2. My Husband John and I, strongly endorse the removal of the grange building as soon as allowed to do so. All of us have a strong feeling for the presence and History of the Grange building. This makes the process difficult, but very necessary, due to the building conditions and ground contamination, all of which have been very well documented and are continuously affecting the surrounding land and buildings. Let us move forward and do what's best for the people and the future of our Town.
3. Your proposal makes excellent sense and I hope the State, et al. agree so things can wisely proceed.
4. I have to give it to “history buffs.” They are constantly reminding us of the cultural value of our landmarks while simultaneously saying we have to fund that culture, usually at exorbitant rates. Tear the darn thing down. Do the oil damage repair. Use a beam or two from the old building. Build a modern, safe edifice we can use that looks like the old one in many ways and move on. That’s one vote and it’s a vote against the alternative unless those folks are contributing the cost difference. I won’t. Thanks for the good work.
5. Curtis, this is a matter of common sense. The building is old and not in any condition to renovate. A restoration would be cost prohibitive, and most likely full of unforeseen problems along the process. I myself have an engineering background and have followed the information available on the options for this building. It seems this should be an easy decision. Demolition and new construction is the way to go. Additionally the aesthetics of the existing building do not warrant spending an exuberant amount of taxpayers’ money. In my opinion the building may have some history, but is not architecturally significant.

6. Thanks for you clear and compelling update on the Grange. Keep up the good work.
7. Can't say I would disagree with anything you said, Curtis. Reasonable and sensible.....My "fellow" R's are proceeding under their own power, and I have really very little input/impact there, nor am I interested in partisanship on this issue anyway. I'll go with whatever the consensus is on any meeting. If no, I'll read anything you forward to me, to keep up with your work on this item.
8. Greetings Grangers,

I think that proceedings of last week to block the demolition of the Grange Hall may have left people with a misconception of the Bridgewater Granges' involvement in the issue. While our Grange is eagerly waiting for the hall to again be habitable, we cannot become involved in any political issue. One of the most important precepts of the Grange at large is that, while we encourage citizens to participate in political matters, no Grange is to become politically involved. Of course any Grange member is encouraged to be active in town politics, but cannot use their Grange membership as a political tool. No Grange can be allowed to become a political football. This an election year, and I would hate to think that our Grange had anything to do with the outcome.

Pro Renovation Comments:

1. Looks like the familiar "ends justifies the means approach" did not work this time. This approach was to select a direction, narrow the options and leave alternatives with incomplete investigation.
2. My professional opinion is that the Grange needs less than half the money you propose to remediate and renovate, and that as a non-professional, you are being taken for a ride. Don't allow yourself to be "snookered" into believing that the building needs to have a million dollars spent on it, and don't be taken for a ride by "experts" who are sniffing out another cash cow to milk.