

Fate of historic Bridgewater grange, now fenced in, still undecided

By [Katrina Koerting](#), Danbury News Times

Tuesday, January 8, 2019

BRIDGEWATER — The historic grange building that once served as a social gathering place for the area's farmers now has a chain link fence around it and no trespassing signs posted. That didn't stop someone, however, from dressing up the condemned property for the holidays by hanging Christmas wreaths and ornaments on the fence — a sign perhaps of the community's continued investment in the building's fate. Town and state officials are now awaiting cost estimates to determine if it makes more sense to preserve the building or tear it down and build a new one that looks historic. "We're in a holding pattern still," First Selectman Curtis Read said.

Todd Levine, a historian with the state Historic Preservation Office, expects numbers by the end of the month. "I think we're in a good spot," Levine said. He said the important thing is that the municipality has agreed to the scope of the plan and the state can now get concrete numbers. The town presented a plan in 2016 to demolish the 1850s-era structure and construct a new building that would be a community gathering space. But the plans stalled this fall when residents discovered the building was on the National Register of Historic Places and the state's Attorney General's Office filed an injunction against the demolition so more information could be gathered.

In the meantime, the town's insurance provider has reduced its coverage and made the town put up the chain link fence and warning signs to keep people out due to the poor condition of the building. The supports for the upper floor are weakened and there is asbestos and termite damage.

State officials have been crafting a renovation plan, which was completed last month so costs can be determined for the agreed upon scope. If the costs are too high, the state will likely allow the building to be replaced but if it looks like the renovation will cost about the same as a new building, the demolition won't be approved. That means the town will have to decide if it renovates or leaves the building unused as is and builds somewhere else.

"It will all go back to the people of Bridgewater when we get our ducks in a row," Read said. The town received three bids to renovate the building, with the average bid at \$1.6 million. A new building is expected to cost about \$900,000. Read said he's approaching the state's proposal with an open mind but worries the renovation costs are more fluid and could cost more than projected. "They make it sound in their plan that it's all pretty easy," he said. "I'm trying to protect the taxpayers of the town."

In the meantime, the town is also looking at alternative spots in case they need to construct a new building somewhere else in town, Read said. He said the state's renovation plan is similar to the town's new construction plans, but questions how much will actually be new once the windows, supports, roof and electrical, heating and plumbing systems are all replaced. He also worried the state's plan can't hold enough people to meet the town's needs. "We don't even have a big meeting space and that was the whole point of this," Read said.

Levine said the state's plan has enough space for 184 people standing, 132 people in chairs and 62 for tables and chairs. The town's plan can accommodate 220 people standing, 160 in chairs and 74 for tables and chairs.

Read also questioned the state's plan to use the top floor, which requires a new staircase and places the utilities on the first floor. "It gets complicated when there's a second floor," he said. Instead, the town's proposal for a new building is an open first floor design with the utilities in the basement. The limited parking and existing septic are also challenges at the current building, Read said. "It's a difficult site to work with," Read said.

The structure was built as a one-room schoolhouse in 1854. The second floor was added in 1900, around when the grange was formed. The grange then sold the building to the town for \$1 in 1999. Advocates for the restoration said the building is an important part of the town's history and needs to be preserved, especially because the town's historical buildings are a big part of its character.

Read said this is one of 61 historic buildings in the historic district, which the town did not apply for. He said the designation is now dictating what they must do with their own buildings. "I don't understand the process of why they don't trust the local people," he said.

