

Minutes
Williamsburg Board of Selectmen
OPM Steering Committee
All Boards
February 18, 2021

The members of the Board of Selectmen met in a special session on Thursday, February 18, 2021, by video conference for an All Boards' Meeting. The chair called the meeting to order at 6:03 p.m.

Select Board: William Sayre, David Mathers, and Denise Banister

OPM Steering Committee: Jim Ayres, Kim Boas, Daniel Bonham, Jason Connell, Brenda Lessard, Jean O'Neil, Paul Wetzel, Denise Wickland

Also present: Rob Todisco (P3), Kevin Chrobak (Juster Pope Frazier), Bob Labrie, Marci Caplis, Francie & Ken Borden, Barbara Bricker, Gaby Immerman, Nick Dines, John Hoogstraten, Eileen Keegan, Charlotte Meryman, Eric Bloomquist, Markelle Smith, Dave Chase, Helen Symons, Julia Peters, Dick Kisloski, Linda Rowley, Joan Coryat, Dave Weber, Paul Wetzel, Lisa Sheehy, Jen Black, Mitch Cichy, Charles Dudek, Mary Dudek, Paul Kennedy, Ben Thompson, Bonnie Roberge, Sherry Loomis, Amy Bisbee, Bev Bullock, Charlene Nardi.

The All Boards' meeting was called to order at 6:03 p.m. The OPM Steering Committee introduced themselves and shared an update on the Public Safety Complex. There were 44 people on the call. It was announced that the meeting was being recorded to share with the community.

Jim Ayres, OPM Steering Committee Chair, asked Committee members to introduce themselves, then gave a summary of the work done by the OPM Steering Committee over the last two years. This included the work that led up to the February 2020 Special Town Meeting which funded the study and schematic design of three scenarios on the James site and the outcome of the study.

Kevin Chrobak, Juster Pope Frazier, walked the group through each of the three scenarios, detailing the findings, outlining the pros and cons, and highlighting the reasons for the recommended option of removing the Helen E. James building and constructing the public safety complex on that same location on the property.

Rob Todisco, P3, went over the repairs needed at the Helen E. James building and associated costs.

Committee members addressed questions in the FAQ document and then attendees asked questions through the chat. The following questions and comments were recorded:

Q. Why do we need a new building for police, fire, and emergency services?

A. The current buildings in Williamsburg and Haydenville were built over 100 years ago. These buildings were not designed for modern community safety operations and are outdated, unsafe and non-functional. The buildings are in

poor condition and their costly renovation would result in buildings that were still not conducive to public safety operations.

Q. Why was it so hard to find a site for a new safety facility?

A. The topography of Williamsburg limits available building sites with sufficient acreage and easy and safe access for emergency vehicles. Other town-owned properties were considered but found unacceptable for various reasons such as lots were too small, access and/or parking was limited, lack of town water, or not in a central location. Private property owners along Route 9 were asked if they wished to sell their property--there were no willing sellers. The current fire and police buildings are sited on lots that are too small for a new safety complex. All of these factors limited the siting of a new safety complex.

Q. What about acquiring privately owned land?

A. To acquire private land, state law requires that the Town conduct an open and fair solicitation of proposals that can be meaningfully compared. The OPM Steering Committee conducted a public solicitation of land back in 2019. This process resulted in zero interest from private land owners in Town.

Q. Can the Town wait and see if additional options and/or land become available?

A. Of course. However, based on historical construction data, the annual cost of materials and labor consistently increases, often up to 5%+ a year. The current climate indicates a competitive time to sell construction work. Because of current unusual market factors, we're finding costs to be down from any typical upward trend. The current market is also yielding low borrowing rates for municipalities funding projects just like this one. In other words, the project will likely cost more money later on.

Q. What would Helen E. James think about the disuse and removal of the school building?

A. From all accounts of her life, Helen E. James was a forward-thinking practical woman. She donated the funds to build the school because at that time it was the greatest need of the community, which the Town benefited from for 100 years (1914 to 2014). In her trust, Mrs. James left funds to help with extraordinary and unusual repairs of the building; however, she also acknowledges and makes a provision for the use of the funds in the event that the building is demolished and not rebuilt or it is no longer used as a school. She understood that the building may not always be useful to the Town. It seems unlikely in reading her story that she would want the Town to invest the necessary amount of funds to convert the 100-year-old building just to keep the building, knowing it wouldn't best meet the Town's current needs in the 21st century.

Q. Is the HEJ building really in such bad shape?

A. Unfortunately, yes. Engineering studies in 2020 found a large list of repairs and renovations needed to bring the building up to modern building codes. These repairs included:

- Total roof replacement and truss repair
- Window and door replacements
- Masonry repairs
- Entrance/exit repairs to meet ADA regulations
- Elevator repairs
- Building and site drainage repairs
- Significant removal of asbestos and all other hazardous materials
- New sprinkler system requirement
- Full mechanical and electrical system replacement
- Significant structural reinforcements for required seismic improvements

To bring the HEJ School building into compliance with current building codes is estimated to cost \$2.1+ million (M).

Q. What would happen to my taxes with each of the three options?

A. See the table on page 5 of the newsletter ([link](#)). The recommended option would add \$56 to each quarterly tax payment for the average single-family house in Williamsburg.

Money would be borrowed for 20 years (at 2.0% interest rate) and debt payments would not start until 2023. Tax increases vary during the life of the loan, which is why averages are given in the last two columns of the table. The average single-family home in Williamsburg is valued at \$279,389 and the average annual tax cost is given in the last column for each option.

Option	Total Borrowed by Town (millions)	Total Interest Paid by Town (millions)	Average Safety Complex Tax Increase per \$1,000 of Property Assessment (\$)	Average Quarterly and (Annual) Safety Complex Tax Increase for Average Single Family House (\$)
1	6.11	1.70	1.20	84 (336)
2	5.36	1.49	1.05	74 (295)
3	4.05	1.12	0.78	56 (223)

Q. Can the HEJ be sold and therefore kept as the main building on that site?

A. Realtor and developer feedback tells us that there is no attractive market for a building with such costly renovation requirements, and a building that is not big enough for profitable housing or business use. Parking is also limited for this use.

Q. Can the current police and fire buildings be sold?

A. That is possible, and though realtors tell us they would bring a very small price, the Town will attempt to do this. Selling these buildings will remove yearly maintenance costs from the budget and potentially add tax revenue.

Q. Can we leave the HEJ Building alone, and build a public safety building next to it?

A. The committee and design team explored this option. The project would be spared the expense of having to demolish the HEJ building, however the added cost of building within the floodplain and high water table on the other half of the site would offset any real savings. Ultimately the committee feels the HEJ should not be left unaddressed. The Town continues to pay 10s of thousands a year to just keep the building maintained as is, while the taxpayers are not benefiting from it.

In addition, if there were to be a new building adjacent to the HEJ of any kind, the site development regarding wetlands mitigation would largely eliminate usable green or park space on the property. Due to Conservation Commission and DEP regulations, building within the floodplain zone requires the replication of wetlands. Much of the existing grass area along the back of the site would end up being replicated wetlands area, not usable by the public.

By building a new public safety building in place of the HEJ, it opens up many opportunities to reinvent the park space both at the corner and adjacent to it for the community's use and engagement.

Q. Will the new public safety building be a metal pre-engineered building?

A. No. The current design is a traditional, wood-framed building that is meant to fit into the fabric of downtown Williamsburg. The design team is very passionate about ensuring that the building design be modest and affordable but attractive and worthy of the HEJ corner.

Q. Why is the new proposed public safety building so expensive?

A. Historical data across the commonwealth will show that new public safety facilities will cost anywhere between 400 and 550 dollars per square foot. There are countless factors; however, the large drivers of costs are usually related to site preparation, size of the building, mechanical and electrical systems, and special equipment and technology. In addition, any publicly funded project is subject to Massachusetts prevailing wage labor rates. Prevailing Wage rates can be 30-35% more than what would be expected in the private industry.

Regarding the current new public safety building design, It has been and will continue to be the objective of the committee, the OPM, and the design team to maintain a modest, simple and affordable building package without sacrificing longevity, quality or appearance. The building will be designed without elaborate electrical and lighting control systems, without highly advanced mechanical system controls, without luxurious materials, and without anything that does not support the operations and safety of its users.

Q. Has the OPM Steering Committee spent the entirety of the \$180,000 that was voted at the previous Special Town Meeting for the current design phase?

A. No. At this point in time the committee has managed to save about 30% of the budget as it has only spent approximately \$120,000 of the approved \$180,000.

Questions by attendees, with answers:

- Is the building in the proposed option slab-on-grade or does it have a small basement?
Slab-on-grade
- What are the annual costs to maintain the James building including insurance? FY19 costs were \$40,000 +.
- Since the size of the proposed building was reduced from when the other properties were looked at, could one of those other properties work? Most likely no, because most town lots were undersized, in the flood plain, on the other side of the river and no private sites were available
- Do you have cost for brick vs. fiber cement? Metal roof vs. shingles? Metal siding vs. fiber cement? Is higher cost up front worth it for longer life? Kevin went into detail but felt the Committee did weigh the options and the proposed design fits the village center and is less costly to maintain and update.
- Are there issues with solar on a metal roof? Yes and no. Holes are driven through that need to be sealed well, and over time the slight movement of that solar units can make the holes bigger causing leaks, but it could be done. A metal roof is not recommended.
- Solar was discussed briefly for the roof. This is something the Committee needs to explore and keep on its radar – if not include now, plan for it in design.
- Has the town considered a co-working space, which seems to be the future we are embracing now? No, the town has not considered that for the James building and not in the new building. Dave Chase noted that the James was too big to fill entirely with

co-working operation and the cost of fixing up the James would make the rents too high to be affordable.

- It was suggested that the building be put in the eastern part of the property leaving space for a park and community space as the view as you travel East on Rte. 9 through the center. Concerns are that the town would have to invest lots of funds in the “dirt” because the property has a high water table and the east section of the property is the lowest part of the property and it is in the floodplain. The Committee members noted that the plan is to create a visually pleasing modest building that fits into the town center. The chosen location gives the most opportunity for usable green space and the least amount of necessary wetland mitigation.
- Nick Dines shared briefly the Mill River Greenway’s vision of use of the green space including a park in honor of Helen E. James and how that could connect to the Mill River Greenway. The development of the park and greenspace will be a separate project and no decisions of what it will look like or include has been determined.
- One individual strongly encourages that the Basketball court be kept because the center offers little in the way of exercise / entertainment for the junior and high school crowd and it is the only part that is actually used now. They would also like to see space for creative ideas to continue such as the ice-skating rink. Noted that the town may not have to landscape the whole area which would limit community possibilities.

The next steps

- Special Town Meeting outdoors behind the Anne T. Dunphy School on Saturday, April 3, 2021 at 2 p.m.
- An all-day vote will be held another day following the special town meeting vote. While April 5 was mentioned this may change.

Future Meetings:

- Wednesday, March 3rd at 6 p.m. via Zoom
- Saturday, March 20th at 10 a.m. via zoom

The meeting was adjourned at 7:38 p.m.