

Frequently Asked Questions
Town of Stockbridge
Plain School Reuse Study
August, 2005

- Q.** *What is happening with the Plain School now that the Berkshire Hills Regional School District (BHRSD) has moved the elementary school into their new building in Great Barrington?*
- A.** Under the terms of an agreement between the Town and BHRSD, the building will be returned to the Town's control sometime in September.
- Q.** *What plans do the Selectmen have for the building?*
- A.** In anticipation of the building being returned to the Town, the Selectmen, at the May, 2004 Annual Town Meeting proposed that the Plain School be renovated for use as Town offices with the existing Town Hall being restored to its original use as a Town Meeting hall, including the removal of the second floor installed in 1960. This use was recommended by the Selectmen based on investigations that most residents wanted to retain ownership of the school. However, as a result of several questions and comments made by voters, at the Annual Town Meeting, it was clear that additional information was needed before any final decision was made regarding the disposition of the school.
- Q.** *What is the Plain School Task Force and who are the members?*
- A.** The Plain School Task Force was created by the Board of Selectmen in June, 2004 following the Town Meeting and charged with answering those questions posed by voters and to conduct a thorough reuse study which investigates all possible options for use of the school, including housing, office space, retail or Town offices, or any combination thereof. Members include all three members of the Board, Deborah McMenamy, Christopher Irsfeld, George Shippey, the Town's Executive Secretary, Jorja-Ann Marsden, and residents, Charles Gillette, David McCarthy, James McMenamy, Laurie Norton-Moffatt, Jack Spencer, and Eva Sheridan. A consultant, Joseph Kellogg, was retained to help facilitate the Task Force's deliberations and investigation.
- Q.** *What alternatives have the Task Force been looking at?*
- A.** After much general discussion regarding which direction the Reuse Study should take, the Task Force decided that two main alternatives (with a number of variations) should be studied, namely:
1. Sell the Plain School to a private developer for commercial or residential use; Renovate the existing Town Hall for Town offices which would require excavating the basement or construction of an addition in order to obtain the required amount of space; a version of this alternative would be to convert the second floor Proctor Hall into office space in lieu of the basement or addition options.
 2. Retain the Plain School and renovate for Town offices, community space, and public/private rental offices; Restore the existing Town Hall as a Meeting Hall for Town Meetings and private functions. Versions of this alternative include either a complete renovation all at once or renovation over time.

Frequently Asked Questions
Plain School Reuse Study
Page 2.

- Q.** *It seems as though the building would be worth a lot of money to a private developer. What did the Task Force find when considering Alternative 1, selling the building? Would there be any interest in an outside party purchasing the building and using it for a private use?*
- A.** To help answer this question, the services of a professional marketing consultant were retained to determine the economics of the building's worth and its possible conversion to a market use. Bay Area Economics (BAE) was hired in August, 2004 to conduct a market study and to make recommendations as to the viability of converting the school for either housing, office, or retail use and to advise on what kind of price the Town could expect to receive for the property. At the same time, an architect, Alderman and McNeish, (A&M) was hired to determine the true costs of the conversion in order to assist the marketing consultant since cost of renovations would be a major factor in determining whether any private enterprise would be profitable. Unfortunately, A&M went out of business before their work on the project could be completed. The services of Caolo and Bieniek Associates, (CBA) were then retained to finish the project and they have continued to assist the Task Force.
- Q.** *Did the marketing consultant find that the building would be attractive for use as private office space?*
- A.** BAE conducted a market study which analyzed the office, retail and housing demand/markets in Berkshire County and found that the building is too large to develop as an office building for one or two users; such users don't exist in the area and to market it to smaller users would require an extensive lease up period requiring a developer to pay substantial carrying costs during this period. Even if the building were to be leased fully in a short time frame, the amount of rents which could be charged in this area would only justify an investment of approximately \$2.6 million, far less than the \$5 million + estimated cost of renovation, let alone any funds the Town would expect in a sale of the property.
- Q.** *What about using the building for retail space?*
- A.** BAE's market study found that due to substantial competition from retail centers in Lee and Great Barrington, there is minimal demand for additional retail in this location. According to the study, there may be some demand for restaurants, drug, and appliance stores, however the architecture of the building is not conducive to these types of retail. Furthermore, estimated future demand for the area totals only 20,000± square feet, less than half of the size of the Plain School.

Frequently Asked Questions
Plain School Reuse Study
Page 3.

- Q.** *Well, how about housing?*
- A.** This type of private use actually has the most potential according to BAE's findings, although they are not recommending luxury condominiums due to their findings that demand for such housing from second home owners is for rural settings, with large patio's, garages, and similar amenities. Moderately priced housing in the form of condominiums would appear to have the most demand and be a better fit for the building. However, based on information provided by both BAE and CBA about the cost of conversion and the level of prices anticipated from sales of such units, they concluded that a developer would be unable to make a large enough profit to warrant an investment, not counting any costs the Town would charge as a purchase price. So, even if a developer was willing to take the risk, the Town could not expect to receive a significant sum for the property.
- Q.** Did the Task Force look at seeking grants and/or subsidies to convert the building for use as affordable housing for persons of low and moderate income?
- A.** Peter Layfayette, with the Berkshire Housing Development Corporation, a non-profit development group with substantial affordable housing experience, met with the Task Force to discuss these possibilities. While he thought the project would present a unique opportunity, he advised the Task Force that it would require substantial subsidies from the State and Federal government. Obtaining such subsidies is a very competitive process and he suggested that the size of the project (estimated 27 units) would probably be too small to be attractive to developers and/or funding sources given the substantial costs of conversion to housing.
- Q.** *What about a combination of housing and office or housing and retail?*
- A.** The Task Force looked at this option, however costs of renovation are higher, due to the need to provide separations between the uses and the ability to share systems, i.e. elevators is lost due to security considerations. Also, the economics are not necessarily that much different to encourage a developer to take on what BAE has advised would be a risky proposition.
- Q.** *Looking at the second part of Alternative 1, renovating the existing Town Hall, what would be involved?*
- A.** Because there is insufficient space to accommodate all Town offices, including the Police Station, an expansion of some type will be needed. One option would be to excavate additional space under the building and expand the basement; a second option would be to add a two story addition in the parking lot. A further variation would be to convert Proctor Hall into offices, in lieu of either the basement excavation or addition, but that would mean a loss of Town Meeting space.

Frequently Asked Questions
Plain School Reuse Study
Page 4.

- Q.** *What would this renovation of the existing Town Hall cost?*
- A.** Based on today's construction prices, the architect for this project, Tuthill and Wells, estimates that a full renovation of the entire building for use as modern office space would cost \$3.3 million, including all construction, design, engineering and related expenses, however the final actual cost will not be known until the project is bid.
- Q.** *Looking at Alternative 2, keeping the Plain School for use as Town Offices, what is that cost?*
- A.** Based on today's construction prices, our architect, CBA, estimates that a full renovation of the entire building for use as modern office space would cost \$5.4 million, including all construction, design, engineering and related expenses, however the final actual cost will not be known until the project is bid.
- Q.** *That seems very high. Why is this amount so much more than renovating the existing Town Hall?*
- A.** The existing Town Hall contains 12,100 square feet, while the Plain School has 44,115 square feet.
- Q.** *That's a big difference, why does the Town need all the space in the Plain School?*
- A.** They don't. Of the entire 44,115 square feet in the building, the Town will only need 13,014 square feet for all offices, including the Police Station, according to a space needs analysis prepared by the architect. The rest of the space would be rented to public and private tenants, bringing in revenue to help offset the cost of renovation.
- Q.** *What happens to the gymnasium in this scenario?*
- A.** It is proposed that the gym be retained in its present form for use by the community for various recreation programs.
- Q.** *Have the Selectmen thought about any potential tenants for the building?*
- A.** Several groups have expressed interest in leasing the excess space, including the BHRSD for its administrative offices and local educational groups for classroom space.
- Q.** *Getting back to cost, if the Town moves its offices to the Plain School, how much would it cost to restore the existing Town Hall to its original form?*
- A.** Tuthill and Wells, the architect hired to prepare plans for the previous Town Hall renovation, has estimated that cost to be \$1.6 million.

Frequently Asked Questions
Plain School Reuse Study
Page 5.

Q. *What would the building be used for?*

A. Details remain to be worked out, however, the proposal is to use the building for all Town meetings, other public meetings, and to rent out the building for private functions such as plays, concerts, weddings, etc.

Q. *What would it cost to maintain the building for such use?*

A. While its unknown as to whether there is sufficient demand for the proposed use, the idea is that fees from the rental would be used to pay for the costs of maintenance.

Q. *Why don't we just sell the current Town Hall if we keep the Plain School?*

A. While the Town owns the building, the land under it is owned by the Congregational Church next door. Any sale would have to be approved by them.

Q. *Why don't we just keep Town offices where they are and sell the Plain School for whatever we can get? At least, it would be back on the tax rolls and generate some type of income for the Town.*

A. First of all, there is a deed restriction on the property which requires that the property be returned to the original grantor or his heirs should the building ever stop being used as a school. The Town has filed for special legislation to remove this restriction, but the process will take time, possibly up to 2 years, and the Town will need to pay maintenance and insurance costs in the meantime. Secondly, during both the first reuse study and the current effort, we have heard very strong feelings from residents that the building should remain in the control of the Town.

Q. *What impact will this project have on my tax bill?*

A. If both buildings (Plain School and Town Hall) are renovated completely with borrowed funds, it is estimated the project will add \$.90 to the tax rate based on current valuations. For the average homeowner with a home valued at \$435,685, the annual tax bill will increase \$392 in the first year of the loan. By the last year of the loan (20th), the average annual increase would drop to \$205 in current dollars.

Q. *Aren't there any grants that could help pay for either or both of these projects?*

A. Due to the relatively good economic health of the Town and its residents, we aren't eligible for several grant programs. However, we are researching the possibility of receiving some Federal assistance to restore the existing Town Hall with the help of our U.S. Representative John Olver. In addition, solicitations

Frequently Asked Questions

Plain School Reuse Study

Page 6.

for donations are being made from those who are interested in the historic significance of the Town Hall and the importance of its preservation. The Selectmen have committed to continue aggressively seeking out any funding source or making design modifications that will lessen the cost of these projects to the Stockbridge taxpayer.

- Q.** *With the recent approval of the regional school building program as well as the sewer upgrade and expansion, it seems like all these projects are coming at once. Why don't we wait until some of these projects are paid off?*
- A.** As noted earlier, some type of decision needs to be made now on whether or not to sell the Plain School since it will be transferred to the Town in September. In addition, construction costs are only going to increase, significantly raising the prices of the projects in the future. If we're going to do something other than sell the building, we need to act soon. Some relief is in sight, however as regards the regional school building project. According to the funding plan, reimbursement from the Commonwealth for that project is expected about the same time this project will begin to have an impact on the tax rate (FY2007). It is estimated that such reimbursement will drop the tax rate approximately \$.30.
- Q.** *What about operating costs for the Plain School project? With the much larger size of the building, how are we going to maintain the building and how much will it cost?*
- A.** The Task Force discussed this issue and has received a proposal from the Berkshire Housing Development Corporation to manage the building, including leasing out all excess space to private and public tenants. BHDC estimates management costs for such services to be in the range of \$50,000 to \$100,000 per year, including janitorial services and supplies. Total operating costs including utilities are estimated to cost \$170,000 per year. However, we anticipate receiving in excess of \$160,000 per year in rental income, resulting in a net cost to the taxpayer of approximately \$10,000, or about \$.01 on the tax rate. For comparison, the existing Town Hall operating costs add about \$.05 to the tax rate.
- Q.** *Has the Task Force come up with a recommendation?*
- A.** Following a public information and input session, the Task Force will meet to deliberate and vote on a recommendation to be made to Town Meeting.
- Q.** *Where and when will the public information session be held?*
- A.** Monday, September 12, 2005, 6:00 p.m. at the Plain School Gymnasium. If you're interested in taking a look at the building, you can show up early at 5:00 p.m. to attend tours conducted by members of the Task Force.

Frequently Asked Questions
Plain School Reuse Study
Page 7.

- Q.** *Where and when will the Town Meeting be held to take a vote?*
- A.** A Special Town Meeting to ask voters to make a final decision will be held at the Plain School Gymnasium on Monday, October 3, 2005 at 6:30 p.m.
- Q.** *What if I want more information or have questions?*
- A.** Come to the public information session. Or you can call any of the Task Force Members and/or the Selectmen's office at 298-4714.