

REPORT OF THE COMMUNITY CENTER COMMITTEE

In the fall of 2015, the Town of Baldwin purchased the former Baldwin Consolidated School. The selectmen established a committee to provide recommendations for how the building could be used, managed, and maintained. The Community Center Committee began holding public meetings twice a month in January 2016 and has received input from many different sources. The committee thanks everyone who has contributed their knowledge, insights, and opinions.

The committee made its initial recommendations to the selectmen in March 2016. These recommendations included naming the former school The Baldwin Community Center to reflect its new use as a resource for the Town and its residents. Many other municipalities throughout Maine have converted former schools to community centers in the last decade.

Since last March, the Community Center Committee's work has focused on issues relating to Maine building codes. Due to its age, the building did not comply with current fire and life-safety requirements. Discontinuance of the prior use as a school meant that the property was no longer grandfathered and could not be legally occupied without significant upgrades.

The committee and the selectmen worked together to obtain a permit from the state fire marshal's office and to arrange for the required renovations. Fortunately, the state fire marshal did not require the Town to install a sprinkler system, which would have substantially increased the cost of compliance. The committee and the selectmen anticipate that the code upgrades will be completed in time for town meeting to once again be held in the multi-purpose room.

Because the building now conforms to state codes, the Town can move ahead with plans for the property. Based on its research and input from residents, the Community Center Committee recommends that the selectmen take the following three steps.

First, the committee recommends that the town office be moved to the Route 113 side of the 1970s addition. The consensus of the committee and town officials is that the current town office, which was built almost 25 years ago, is inadequate for the needs of town government. As the Baldwin Research Committee stressed in its 2014 report, “[s]tate and federal mandates alone have greatly increased the effort, expertise, and expense needed to properly run town government.” The Community Center Committee believes that moving the town office to a larger and better designed space will allow the Town Clerk to more efficiently serve the public; provide secure storage space for town records as required by state law; furnish working areas for the selectmen, office staff, code enforcement officer, general assistance administrator, and fire chief; enhance confidentiality for sensitive matters; provide better access to public records; and improve the work environment for town officials and employees.

Second, the committee proposes that the multi-purpose room and the former classrooms on the south side of the 1970s addition be devoted to community functions. These uses would include recreation, health, fitness, and educational programs for young and old; meeting rooms for town government, local nonprofit organizations, and other groups; events such as public

suppers, wedding and baby showers, birthday parties, wedding receptions, and funerals; an emergency shelter for town residents that satisfies FEMA requirements;¹ and a commercial kitchen to support these as well as other activities.

Third, the committee recommends that the selectmen pursue renting other areas of the building, including the four classrooms in the original school, the small offices located off the main entrance vestibule, and the current town office. Although these areas may be needed in the future for town government or community activities, they will not be required for at least a decade. Renting to nonprofit groups, individuals, and businesses will generate revenue to reduce the burden on taxpayers. In addition, full occupancy of the building will enhance town government and community uses. This recommendation is consistent with the practice of the many other municipalities in Maine that rent surplus space in their former schools to nonprofit groups and businesses.

The Community Center Committee urges residents to authorize the selectmen to begin implementing the three recommendations outlined in this report. The committee believes that converting the former school to a community center will improve the quality of life for Baldwin residents and create a greater sense of community. The extensive use of the ballfields and playground last summer illustrate the benefits of having a community center, and the committee will be working to expand these outdoor uses as well.

The cost of the committee's recommendations will be developed as the projects proceed, and residents will have an opportunity to vote on these expenses at future town meetings. The selectmen and the committee are also exploring the availability of grants for the emergency shelter, the commercial kitchen, and any other improvements that may qualify.

Please feel free to contact members of the committee if you have any questions or concerns.

February 1, 2017

Submitted by: Kurt Olafsen, Chair
Paul Thomas, Vice Chair
Deb Boulanger, Secretary
Bruce Crawford

¹ The only emergency shelter currently available to Baldwin residents is in Sebago, and Sebago residents have priority.