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Health and safety are paramount

By Bob Nadeau

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MAYNARD -

The last five years of budgetary pressures, in the form of cuts in local aid as well as fixed cost increases, have limited Maynard's ability to proactively address our capital needs. Despite creative ways of funding, costs efficiencies and cuts to a variety of departments, capital improvements have suffered more than any other area from the lack of revenues.

Every town wants to dedicate a regular line item to address capital needs and over the last two years the Board of Selectmen, in partnership with the new Capital Planning Committee, have worked with town departments and the School Committee to address priority capital requests. With many of our buildings decades old, we have recognized that a Band-Aid approach to repairs was the wrong approach. Despite the funding issues, and with the support of residents, we started replacing or upgrading a number of facilities including: the Fowler Middle School, the new library and the water treatment facility.

This year, we are faced with some extremely important facility issues that directly affect the health and safety of students, faculty, police officers, firefighters and staff. The Board of Selectmen, Finance Committee and School Committee felt it was our duty and responsibility to bring forward a plan to annual Town Meeting that would address these vital capital needs to ensure a healthy and safe educational, public safety and working environment for all.

The passage of Article 14 at the annual Town Meeting on May 21 is the key to this effort and we appreciate that residents are realizing and supporting the funding for the important projects in this article. Article 14 asks residents to approve a \$4.82 million debt exclusion override so that the town can address the health and safety deficiencies that exist in our Public Safety Building, the High School and Green Meadow Elementary School buildings. If the article is approved at Town Meeting, voters would then finalize approval of the debt exclusion funding by voting in a June 12 Special Election for the purpose of approving the 20 year debt exclusion question. Below we have outlined what is included in the \$4.8 million debt exclusion request.

For years, residents have heard or seen firsthand the condition of the current public safety building. It is a poor symbol of who we are as a community and no building in the community is in worse condition. It was designed for half the number of officers it serves today and for 52 years the building has served our community's police and fire officials. With cramped offices; inadequate storage areas; no private interview and counseling areas; an unsecured booking area that shares space with dispatch; no access for the disabled; inadequate evidence storage; inadequate locker, kitchen and bathroom facilities; no public parking; no safe prisoner transport access; and major plumbing and electrical problems, the police side of the facility must be moved and built anew. A recent installation of the new Enhanced 911 phone system was a logistical nightmare and the state agency responsible for the installation remarked it was one of the worst dispatch centers they have worked with.

The solution is a new, efficient police station built within the former library next to Town Hall. This will be a station that solves the above problems for the police, and enhances our public safety services for the next 30 years. By re-using the old library building we generate a savings of 30 percent compared to the cost of building a new stand-alone station. With this opportunity to build a new station, within an existing resource, we are solving a decades old problem with an efficient use of space at a responsible cost of \$3.9 million.

While we solve the police station issue, the fire department will remain in the existing building until we can address the broader station issue in the future. However, the need to address health and safety issues for the fire department remains and for this year we must address the 52-year-old, failing, asbestos covered boiler that heats the facility by replacing it with a new energy efficient unit for approximately \$200,000. This work must take place or we will be forced to continue to put money into a failing system with an asbestos liability.

On the school side, there are facility issues that must be addressed to ensure that our students, faculty and staff are learning, teaching and working in a safe environment. In the Green Meadow School, our priorities are again heating systems that are inadequate to properly heat our learning environments; air handling systems that do not provide our kids the proper exchange of the air they breathe and a roof prone to leaks. Exhaust fans do not meet current building codes and the kitchen hoods have no fire protection. All of these things must be replaced. The High School also faces similar heating issues that affect the health of students and staff. We are committed to replacing these systems and converting both the High School and Green Meadow School to more energy efficient sources of fuel that will save the Town money. These costs are approximately \$720,000 of the \$4.8 million.

The Selectmen fully support the School Committee on the need to address these issues. Similarly the School Committee has supported the Selectmen in the need for a new police station. Throughout fiscal 2007, the two boards, and the Finance Committee, have worked together on the many issues that must be addressed in order to fix the health and safety issues facing the schools, and also address the issues that satisfy NEASC (the NE accreditation organization) and keep our schools accredited.

In fact, all the board's felt the accreditation issue so important that we found other revenue sources, outside of the debt exclusion, to fund the priority High School repair issues that NEASC has agreed are the key for this year.

Because the NEASC related issues for the High School are being funded elsewhere and not included in the debt exclusion requested in Article

14, all the Boards agreed that the health and safety issues facing our buildings must be addressed together. This is not a school versus town issue, it is simply a Maynard issue. There is no one item in the article more or less important than the other. We need to improve the air quality and heating plant that are not adequate for a healthy and proper learning environment at the Green Meadow School. We need to replace the asbestos-covered boiler that is inadequate to heat the fire station. We need to move the existing Police Station because of the many public safety and related deficiencies in the existing building and build one that meets our basic public safety needs in a safe, reliable and cost effective manner. We need to remove the boiler from the High School and replace it with one that can adequately and efficiently heat the school and its students, faculty and staff.

We are putting money into stop-gap repairs each year that are simply a waste of time and money and residents have come to us tired of it. Article 14 is our chance to finally address these issues before they become so cost prohibitive that we never do anything until someone gets hurt; an unacceptable scenario to the Selectmen, School Committee, Finance Committee, Capital Needs Committee and Public Safety Building Committee. Maynard continues to work towards a better quality of life for everyone and voting in support of Article 14 at the May 21 annual Town Meeting will continue that progress.

Bob Nadeau is a member of the Board of Selectmen.

