

Operational Plan - Restoration and Use of Town Hall Auditorium

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Current occupants of town hall auditorium and stage space to be moved to either:

- A. addition off rear of town hall or
- B. a separate new town hall near by

Background

From 1874-1985 the auditorium of the Rye Town Hall was used for a wide variety of purposes by many different groups, both public and private. The 19th century exterior of the building, including its c. 1870's circular stairs along with the turn of the 20th century pressed tin ceiling, stage and proscenium arch all combine to make this very public building in Rye Center an historic treasure which has always served the town with many practical uses.

Portsmouth historian Dennis Robinson has made it very clear to many business groups and in the pages of the Portsmouth Herald how economically important it is to preserve and to use historic buildings. Their existence and use adds to the aesthetic appeal and economic vitality of any community. The quality of New England towns is greatly enhanced, not to mention property values, by maintaining and using handsome 19th century public buildings. The Rye Town Hall is the only one we have and when Rye residents actually see that they have a historic performing arts space as well as a large multi-purpose meeting room, there is a good chance they will support it.

During the 1950's and 1960's, when the gymnasiums of the two schools became available, the town hall continued to be used for town government meetings and cultural and historic events and performances. In 1986 town offices began to move into the auditorium, but half of the space was reserved for seating for Selectmen and other town government meetings. The perimeter of that open space was even used for displaying historical artifacts and photos of the Rye Historical Society. By 2004 the Great Hall and stage were fully partitioned off for town government use.

Proposal to Restore the Auditorium and Stage - Justification

It is a well-known fact that Rye town government boards and commissions as well as other groups in town are constantly in search of open interior space to pursue their meetings and activities. Between the two schools and the library there is simply not enough space. To bring the auditorium and stage back to its open use of 1985 would not entail much work as all the partitions, walls, etc. are temporary. The historical aspects of the interior design of the town hall were not compromised in the last 27 years.

This proposal to restore this large space is based on an assumption that there will be one of two options chosen to house the town employees who would be displaced. These employees include the Selectmen/town manager office, the assessor's office, and the finance director/assist. Town manager's office and some additional space for part time employees (treasurer and sewer dept.) In this scenario, the Rye Recreation dept. would move out to another facility. There needs to be a short term plan to accommodate them such as the schools or rental of church space and a long term plan such as a new building at the rec. area. If the Rec. dept. remains at town hall, it will require the addition to be too big.

Once reasonable square footage for each town employee is agreed upon, space would be provided in an addition off the back of town hall or a new town very near by just up the hill. A connecting ramp from the upper town parking lot to the 2nd story of the existing town hall would be needed for access as well as a new first floor entry to the existing town hall.

Regarding the needed expansion square footage it is important to remember the following: At the 2011 Deliberative session, Article 14 (which passed providing further study and resulted in one option created by AG architects) was amended to include a reference to 21st century technology. The Deliberative session voted in favor of this amendment so a majority of those voters consider technology an important issue, but it was not addressed in the AG report. Rye is not projected to grow significantly in the future due to 1/3 of the town being fresh or salt water, conservation easements and other conservation land so there will not be a significant growth in town employees. Whatever minimal growth is experienced can be accommodated by scanning documents and converting freed storage space to offices. If originals need to be retained for legal reasons, they can be warehoused off site in an inexpensive storage building that need not meet the architectural and construction standards of Town Hall.

This proposal also recognizes that beyond any additions etc., infrastructure changes need to be made to town hall such as insulation of attic, any needed structural support in upper part of the building, new storm windows and sealing around existing windows.

In the existing town hall additional downstairs space would be freed up if there is a staircase and basement in the addition. The current back staircase could be removed with two means of egress available with the addition. The current very large boiler room could also be freed up with a small very efficient boiler located in the basement addition to assist the new geothermal system on cold days.

Wherever this new space is created, it would include a modest conference room for meetings (suggested size 150-200 sq. ft.). If the addition off town hall option is chosen, then there would be construction of a small two story lobby space adjoining the old and new buildings which would receive an entry ramp into the 2nd floor of the new lobby from the Rye town parking lot beside the church. This would allow easy access to both the auditorium and new town office space.

One scenario for the existing downstairs of town hall would be for the town clerk/tax collector and planning director and building inspector to use the full space including “court room” meeting space since upstairs would be the new meeting hall. However those decisions will be made in the context of where all the other offices will be located.

One important reason for not adding too large an addition on to town hall is that it would overwhelm and compromise the historical architecture of the existing building which is a worthy candidate for state and national historic registry.

A second reason for limiting the size of an addition is to permit the existing geothermal system to accommodate the building (except on the very coldest days). Federal money is no longer available and Geothermal systems are very expensive. If the town needs to expand the system by drilling more wells, it will have to foot the entire bill. Insulating the existing building, especially the attic and making sure the addition is well insulated should ensure that the existing wells and hardware are sufficient.

What would the auditorium (great hall) be used for?

1. First and foremost the hall would be for town government use; Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Zoning Board of Adjustment, etc. as well as other meeting space required by town government. Flexible seating and tables as well as audio visual equipment would be available to seat a variety of audience sizes. (A partition dividing the space in the middle could be explored so that two meetings could happen at once in the hall, but that idea could wait to see if there is a demand for that much space.) Given the many meetings in town hall, it is clear that during the weekdays the hall would be in great demand.

2. Town Elections could be held here to relieve the strain and parking congestion on the Elementary School

3. Non-governmental use of the hall: (Note - A policy would need to be established for use of the hall beyond what is stated above. (I.e. supervision, security of town office space, rental if appropriate, etc.) It is assumed that all town office space would be locked at the end of the business day so that anyone using the hall in the evening and weekends for cultural/recreational or other use would have no access to town office space or equipment.

Use of audio visual equipment permanently located in the great hall would be under the supervision of the town employee designated to open town hall and supervise all events. (Custodian?) Bathrooms would be located on the 2nd floor of the new addition, the only access that the public would have to that part of the building after business hours.

A. Recreation - even though the Rec. Dept. is part of town govt., it deserves a special category

B. Town Cultural presentations, performances (i.e. theater, speakers, film, etc.) Note that the library does not have much space to expand its meeting room (currently approx. 55 max.) and has had over flow audiences in recent years and had to turn people away. The town hall would seat at least 125. These could be events sponsored by town organizations such as the Historical Society, the Library, Lions, etc. (Note – there would be openings on weekday nights when there is no town govt. demand for the space and the weekend nights and days.

C. Rental to outside groups to stage events/performances/ conferences, etc. – a policy would have to be adopted for this use. Rental fees could help defray annual costs associated with the renovation/addition to the town hall. It remains to be seen if significant rental income could be generated by the restored auditorium, but its historic character gives it much more appeal than other spaces in town. It would be up to the town to promote this rental use.

To summarize –If the town hall auditorium/stage is opened up again, what could it be used for?

Note – estimated capacity will be 125 – more than twice the capacity of Library meeting room

1. Large Town government board meetings

2. Small meetings at same time with partitions

3. Additional meetings during the day related to town government departments and boards

4. Town Elections – relieve school of burden

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5. Cultural performances:

- Theater – there is a great precedent already set here
- Films – evening films for larger audience - to complement Library's Wed. PM films
- Musical events - once again – a strong precedent – very good acoustics
- Recitals - ditto
- Presentations/ Lectures/ Discussions – overflow Library programs need this large space

6. Recreation

7. Senior citizen activities

8. Historical Exhibits – Town Museum needs large space for certain programs

9. Social – parties, dances, fund raisers, receptions, etc.

10. Conferences – flexible new seating and tables make this appealing

11. Fairs – bring back the old holiday church fair

12. Rental by outside groups

13. Etc.

Note – There is no reason why the town government facilities of town hall cannot be secured during use of the auditorium by non-government groups. The town can also determine if modest usage fees have to be charged to these non-government town groups for heating, electricity, custodial service, etc.