

MUNICIPAL OFFICES RECEIVING LONG-NEEDED ATTENTION

FLURRY OF PROJECTS MODERNIZING AND EXPANDING TOWN OFFICES

It is easy to understand Calais Town Clerk Eva Morse's excitement when you step into the new town office. The vibrant colors, the beautiful cherry table, the big windows – all make the office an inviting destination for researching public records, filing papers for zoning permits, or just friendly conversation. Morse's commute may be a bit longer now (all of about two miles), but she doesn't seem to mind. After over forty-one years of housing the town office in her living room, kitchen, basement, and garage, she welcomes the commute in return for some personal space in her house.

Calais appears to be one of the first in a wave of municipal building projects around the state. Many towns are in various phases of planning and constructing new municipal spaces. Some municipalities are building new, some are renovating or expanding their current space, some have changed locations, and some have transported the old office to a new location. Lack of space is the main reason for these changes. More room is needed to effectively preserve the ever-growing town records. Calais' new vault has an air moisture level monitor, good lighting, a telephone and plenty of space.

There is also a demand for public buildings to become compliant with the American Disabilities Act (ADA). In the past, Morse would take documents to the home of disabled residents or take them out to their waiting vehicle. This is no longer necessary with the new building. On the second day it was open for business, a wheelchair-bound resident easily maneuvered through the new office and efficiently completed research.

Whatever the reason for the change, towns must go through a lengthy process.

Each new municipal space begins as an idea. The idea then grows into a committee, created to assess the town's need for a new municipal office. Committees often include a mix of municipal officials and citizens to provide a good cross-section of the community. Most towns also hire external assistance, such as an engineer or architect. Although external resources can seem expensive initially, the money and energy saved tends to pay off in the end. Calais hired local architect John McCullough of Artichoke Designs, who designed the building to resemble an old schoolhouse. This model was taken around town to show residents and gather feedback.

These committees discuss every option for changing or altering municipal space. Some desired characteristics for committees to keep in mind include location – ideally in the village center – available town land, privacy for different town departments, meeting space, potential grant opportunities and cost. After what can be years of discussion, the committee creates a proposal. The case is presented to the selectboard and, eventually, put to a vote. The proposal often takes more than one vote before passing. In Calais, the first proposal failed in the midst of a debate about whether to renovate an old building at one end of town or build a new one in the town center. After making some necessary changes, the proposal passed the second time around.

In addition to the bond measure, Calais received a generator from the Department of Homeland Security. The new office will serve as headquarters in the event of an emergency. The historical society also helped by installing track lighting for a corner display of town history.

New buildings must go through the permitting process and new municipal buildings are no exception. Some towns find this to be a struggle. Morse called permitting the "biggest hurdle," but noted that it all worked out in the end.

Calais ended the project just *under* its \$211,000 budget, although Morse isn't quite ready to say the project is complete. There is still a cupola to be built, at her expense. A cupola was cut from the original plan because it was considered "extra." Morse promised that she would pay for the cupola when the building was complete.

Other towns making changes include **Mendon**, **Plainfield**, and **Roxbury**. Their stories are unique, but follow a similar process.

Mendon: The Town of Mendon broke ground this past August to build a new town office adjacent to the old. The Town had a desire to stay in the same, prominent location because of its "village center feeling." The old building was small and the Town had outgrown the space. All of the departments shared one big room. The electrical system needed updating, and compliance with the ADA was necessary. Mendon created a committee to begin looking into a solution. Mark McManus, an engineer from Middletown Springs, was hired to assist the committee. Ann

Singiser, town clerk and informal “clerk of the works,” heaped praise on Mr. McManus, saying he “saved the town thousands of dollars throughout the process.” Discussion went on for nearly six years, and Mendon’s committee found that the cost to expand its current office was equal to building new. A thirty-year bond measure easily passed voter approval on Town Meeting Day 2004.

During the planning process, the Mendon selectboard saved \$125,000 for the project, while meeting consistently to consider all possible options. Although the bond measure passed on the first try, the bids came in higher than expected. A special meeting was called last summer to increase expenditures on the project. The proposal that passed was to use the cash balance at the end of the fiscal year as well as increase the tax rate by five percent. To ease local taxpayer contribution, Mendon also received Agency of Transportation Park and Ride grant funding to pave the driveway and parking area in exchange for ten commuter parking spaces. The total cost of this project was approximately \$330,000.

Singiser also noted the most complex part of the project was the permitting process. The new building involved a host of permits, including local zoning, Vermont Department of Labor and Industry, Agency of Transportation, wastewater, Act 250, and even a variance from Mendon’s own zoning board of adjustment.

Plainfield: After agreeing that new municipal space was necessary, the Town voted in March of 2001 to fund the project. Next, a committee was appointed and research began. More room was needed, especially within the vault. The old vault had nearly reached capacity and air quality was less than ideal for historical record preservation. The committee recommended the purchase of a village building for renovation after more than two years of review. This recommendation was approved in December of 2003 with a projected budget of approximately \$400,000. The budget was comprised of savings, grant funding and a bond measure. After some bumps in the road, an architect was hired to act as project manager. Plainfield contracted with the Vermont Offender Program for demolition and construction, and with others for electrical and mechanical work. Efficiency Vermont is assisting with energy conservation measures. Linda Wells, town clerk, has been pleased with the contractors. The goal is to be in the new building by March of 2005.

Roxbury: Roxbury moved its existing office, an old railroad station, twenty feet closer to the road and onto town land. The old office connects to a newly constructed addition, and houses a new vault, which is three times as large as the old one. This, according to Gloria Gerdes, town clerk, and Tammy Legacy, assistant to the selectboard, is the best feature.

The Roxbury selectboard was aware of the space issues at the old building and began discussing options. The municipal employees wanted to keep the current office. An architect, Badger Associates, was hired to assist with ideas, and selectboard chair Tom Frazier began applying for grants. The Town was quite successful despite the rigors of the grant process and having to repeat the bidding process four times. Roxbury effectively funded its construction and relocation project with grant monies. With \$160,000 in enhancement grants from the Agency of Transportation, \$25,000 from Preservation Trust of Vermont, \$15,681 from USDA, and \$40,000 from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, Roxbury asked the community for only \$28,000 for project start-up fees.

Roxbury’s main difficulty was dealing with the railroad that owned the land the current office was located on. It took several years to get permission to simply move the building off of the land. This move was well worth the wait, as the railroad no longer has a stake in the building and the town no longer has a lease.

Each town expresses its identity in unique ways. Calais, Mendon, Plainfield and Roxbury are expressing their identities with new gathering places, and their municipal officials are excited. When Eva Morse in Calais gives a tour, her pride shines through. When speaking with Ann Singiser, her excitement is evident. Linda Wells is looking forward to knowing the town records are well preserved. And just mentioning the size of the new vault fills Roxbury’s Gloria Gerdes and Tammy Legacy with great anticipation. These municipal officials have much to be happy about.

- Tara Fischer, Research and Information Assistant, VLCT Municipal Assistance Center

AROUND THE STATE...

This is an informal list of other Vermont towns working on new or existing municipal office space (not including public safety buildings). If your municipality should be on this list, please let us know by e-mailing tfischer@vlct.org.

Arlington: Expansion.

Berlin: Discussion. November 2004 vote failed by 22 votes.

Essex: Wants a new building; in discussion stages currently.

Hartford: In beginning stages; proposal to be submitted at next Town Meeting.

Randolph: Bond approved November 2004 for expansion and renovation of current offices.

Roxbury: Moving building to different spot along with expansion.

Stockbridge: Built one year ago.

Swanton: Just finished renovations.

Thetford: Just completed a large renovation.

Winhall: Completed last year.

Wolcott: Moving to new building (used to be school building).

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