

TOWN OF STRAFFORD

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After much deliberation, the Selectboard has put a special article on the warning asking the town for authorization to spend \$300,000 for acquiring and renovating the Tilles property next to Barrett Hall for new town offices. This is an important decision for the town, and the board is sending you this letter to explain its reasoning. We hope the following questions and answers will address the fundamentals of a decision that ultimately will be yours.

WHY NOW?

Actually, this is a proposal that has been long in the making. Engineering reports starting 2019, including the most recent reports from November 2021

(https://www.traffordvt.org/files/ugd/0580b2_99a53d05657a4e4a88a681232ee89143.pdf; https://www.traffordvt.org/files/ugd/0580b2_dcc5e250f0a14a579dfc9d80ce781dc6.pdf), have flagged structural and safety concerns of over two decades. In 2019, the Selectboard developed a plan to renovate our existing building at a cost of approximately \$400,000 at pre-pandemic rates. The COVID pandemic put the whole process on hold and also served to underline the urgency of the problem. For much of the past two years, we have been forced to close the office, prohibit public attendance at Selectboard meetings, and limit services to the public to ensure social distancing in our too-small space.

What had been a problem became something of a crisis last September when a utility pole fell on the back stairway, making the upstairs temporarily unusable. A report by a structural engineer from DeWolfe Engineering Associates of Montpelier on Sept. 29 provided grave warnings about the deterioration of the structure and estimated it would cost \$150,000 just to stabilize it. Merely making the current building safe might make sense if it were otherwise adequate. It's far from it. The municipal building needs additional space for:

- Workspace for auditors, the tax collector and listers.
- A vault and other storage space that will be adequate to our needs.
- A bathroom that is accessible to all and complies with federal law.
- A well-ventilated meeting room for the Selectboard and other committees and boards.
- An Emergency Management Unit that can start up quickly to meet state and town requirements.

As it happens, the Selectboard had appointed a Town Office Planning Committee a few months before the utility pole fell. It conducted a thorough review of existing options, including the 2019 renovation plan, and other town-owned properties, and found that the existing building was not optimal, and there were no good town-owned sites on which to build ([link here](#)). They recommended that the Selectboard seek a structure or land site that can be converted to, or on which to build, a Town Office with at least 2,000 square feet of

usable space located outside a flood risk area, with adequate parking, and located in one of the villages. Since the committee issued its report, the Tilles property at 7 Justin Morrill Highway became available.

WHY THE TILLES PROPERTY?

The Selectboard believes the Tilles property presents the best way forward because it offers the following features and advantages:

- It offers 3,500 square feet of space, which is sufficient for the estimated minimum requirements (https://www.traffordvt.org/files/ugd/0580b2_66749c6c14694baaaa8e49603486ad79.pdf), in three buildings:
 - A house built in 1987 that has two bedrooms with 888 square feet, including bathroom and kitchen, and an unfinished 864-square-foot basement. It could be reconfigured for the offices of the Town Clerk and assistant, workspace for auditors and other temporary workers and a reception desk to attend to town citizens' needs.
 - A detached 1.5-story garage and shed that together offer a little more than 1,000 square feet of space. They could be reconfigured for listers offices, a vault, research space and small meeting room and storage. A connecting passage to what is now the house would be needed to allow town office staff to oversee use of the vault.
 - A two-story gambrel-roofed barn built in 2015 that offers approximately 1,600 square feet and could be used for meeting space on the ground level and by an Emergency Management Unit on the second floor.
- It is in one of the two villages — a recommendation of the planning committee — yet, unlike many of the parcels in the villages, is not in a flood-risk area.
- It is close to Barrett Hall, the school and other town properties, potentially allowing for future energy and climate change efficiency investments.
- It offers adequate parking.
- It would not add to congestion in the lower village.
- It would allow for incremental movement of town office functions as renovation work is completed and funding is available. This would reduce disruption of town services and save us from having to find a temporary town office site during building repairs.

The assessed value of \$190,000, this doesn't reflect current market prices, and we believe that the price is not unreasonable given what properties in Strafford have sold for in the last two years. Before purchasing the property, the Selectboard will commission a feasibility study to inspect the site to confirm that it is suitable, and to estimate renovation costs and develop a detailed plan. Based on the feasibility study, we will develop a timeline and undertake negotiations for purchase of the property.

WHY NOT FIX UP AND/OR EXPAND THE CURRENT OFFICE?

The disrepair of the current office is well-documented, and the need for more space is also very clear. Unfortunately, the parcel that the current office sits on has absolutely no space for expansion. The very thoughtful 2019 renovation plan would not gain the additional working space needed for all the people who need to work in the building, access the records and conduct the town's business. There is no clear way forward in the current footprint of the building to meet the office requirements. Additionally, the location suffers from a lack of parking—we currently use the neighbor's private property. In other words, we would

end up spending over \$400,000 and end up with a stabilized but still very inadequate municipal building. Permission to expand the parcel has not been granted and building on the site will require elevating the ground, which currently floods with any significant rainfall, and would add dramatically to the cost. The Selectboard feels that the Tilles property offers a cheaper option that allows us to gain all the workspace required and that can be acted on promptly.

HOW WILL WE PAY FOR IT?

The Selectboard intends to take all possible steps to make cost-effective choices and avoid raising taxes. Our plan is to use the Town Office reserve funds, cost savings from the 2021 budget, proceeds from the sale of selected parcels of town-owned property that are not of use to the town, and to seek grants and donations to complete the renovations. Our current funding plan is shown below but will be refined as we get findings from the feasibility study, which will allow us to look for grants and conduct other fund-raising efforts.

Estimated Cost Summary of Tilles Property Purchase

REVENUE	
Reserve as of 12/31/21	\$79,197
Budgeted 2022	\$50,057
Sale of town owned property*	\$73,900
Sale of current town office*	\$217,000
ADA Grant (State), and other raised funds	\$100,000
TOTAL REVENUE	\$520,154
EXPENSES	
Tilles property purchase	\$300,000
Vault	\$100,000
Renovations, attorney's fees, etc..	\$150,000
TOTAL EXPENSES	\$550,000
Estimated Outstanding Project Expense	\$29,846

* Land values from 2021 Billed Grand List Tax Book Report dated 8/17/21

It is the Selectboard's responsibility to ensure a functioning, safe and adequate municipal building. Simply put, we are not meeting that responsibility now and believe that purchase of the Tilles property represents our best option for doing so. Details of the Selectboard's analysis of the town office requirements will be presented in the Informational Hearing on Feb 19. We urge Strafford residents to attend the meeting and ask any questions about this important decision.

The Selectboard

Lon M. Pappas, Chair