

Howes House Project Assessment

July 12, 2023

Purpose: This attempts to identify the issues with the Howes House project and offer suggestions for resolving them. It recommends starting over with a formal, written architectural brief that essentially asks to renovate the Howes House and bring it up to code--as originally understood by the Town. It must also comply with the character of the Historic District and the Historic District Commission's published architectural guidelines.

Background: The Howes House is primarily used for Council on Aging (COA) activities. From time to time other public meetings and functions take place in this building provided they do not conflict with Council on Aging schedules and uses. The building's use is not exclusive to West Tisbury. These additional uses are for organizations or the general public in any town. The structure is in the Town's voter-sanctioned Historic District. The Historic District Commission (HDC) has clearly defined goals for the district and a published list of architectural guidelines that been successfully used for over 40 years to preserve the character of this special section of Town. These guidelines are consistent with those published by the Massachusetts Historical Commission and other local town historic district guidelines throughout the Commonwealth.

As with most historic structures the building has been added onto over time and is in need of renovation and upgrades for accessibility, general building code compliance and parking needs. The nature of these upgrades will add square footage to the structure and change its footprint.

The project has several hurdles to overcome that are impeding its progress. These must be resolved before the project can meaningfully proceed as a lot of time and money are being spent.

Assessment: I attended the most recent building committee and Historic District Committee meetings on July 5, 2023 and reviewed the drawings to get an understanding of the status. I asked for a copy of the formal brief given to the architects and if the HDC architectural guidelines were included. There is no brief and I was advised by Jen to read all of the committee's published meeting minutes from 12/9/21 through 6/7/23. I have done so.

Here is an outline of the facts and issues as I see them.

1. The project has grown from a renovation of the Howes House with code compliance upgrades at an estimated cost of \$ 4 million to a project that increases the total area of the Howes House by + 54 percent—from 6,147 sq. ft. to 9,489 sq. ft. The cost estimate is now \$10 million. The current design devotes 1,990 sq. ft. to bathrooms (270 sf), stairs (480 sf), elevator (240 sf) and mechanical equipment room (1,000 sf).

2. A specific use of the new usable work space has not been articulated. This new space excluding the previously mentioned code compliance and mechanical space is + 1,352 sq. ft. versus the current Howes House area. (My house is 1,400 sq. ft.). The existing space when added to this additional work space is requiring the 1,000 sq. ft. mechanical room and probably additional bathrooms.
3. The towns of Chilmark and Aquinnah, the other two Council on Aging partners, have not agreed to contribute financially to this project. The building committee member comment made on 11/17/22 is not a valid, town-sanctioned point of view "If Chilmark and Aquinnah do not participate and provide support, West Tisbury will bring it forward on its own for use by the Town." This would essentially dissolve the Up-Island Council on Aging which is established by a Town Bylaw adopted in 1972. A minimum 2/3 Town Meeting vote is required to dissolve this bylaw and organization.
4. The Historic District Commission has not approved the current design as it does not meet its published architectural guidelines for the district. The primary concern is the structure's "mass" does not comply with the character of the historic district. As a side note, the original designs developed by this architectural firm for the Chilmark firehouse and Tri-Town Ambulance building were scrapped because they did not comply with the written brief mandating both buildings be consistent with the Town's architectural character.
5. The project must have Martha's Vineyard Commission review as a DRI and approval before receiving any local town permits. The MVC has recently focused on historic structures on the island as evidenced by its \$100,000 fine for the improper demolition of the silo in Vineyard Haven and the MVC's subsequent new policy for historic structures that mandates Development of Regional Impact (DRI) review. Past decisions indicate the MVC will not approve the project if the Town has not secured the approval and endorsement of the Historic District Commission.
6. The project must comply with Town zoning and Board of Health bylaws and regulations. This formal review has not yet taken place.
7. Parking lot needs for the larger building have not been clearly fleshed out in an area of Town that already has insufficient public parking for the activities that take place.
8. The space for this project has not been evaluated in the following terms which would help identify what is needed space and what is nice to have space. The focus group interviews of a handful of town and out of town residents does not justify the added amenities and services coming from these interviews and their resulting impact on the scope, size, and cost for the project.

The space should be evaluated and itemized as follows. It will help define the architectural brief.

How much space (sq. ft.) is devoted to the following uses?

Offices, bathrooms, hallways, closets, storage space, kitchen, meeting rooms, walls, stairways, mechanicals and the existing available Howes House space that cannot be used because of access or other issues.

What space is used for exclusive Council on Aging (COA) services and how much space is also used by other organizations provided it fits within the COA schedule of activities? It seems to me the other organizations use the same meeting room space, bathrooms, parking lot and the basement space for their functions as does the COA when not in use by the COA.

Analyze from the COA annual calendar of activity reservations how many of the annual program uses are COA programs and how many are other, non COA uses. For example, does the Council on Aging use the building and space 90 percent of the time?

Recommendations

1. Retreat and Act. Do not continue to advance and react. Halt the project as it is currently conceived and has a growing lack of support among town residents.
2. Scale back the scope of this project to its original intent and understanding of the Town. Renovate the Howes House and bring it up to code. The original \$ 4 million cost estimate to do this is now probably \$ 5-6 million. This will help taxpayers given the following finance discussion.
3. A scaled back design and lower cost will focus it on the needs of the Council on Aging and most likely receive financial support from Chilmark and Aquinnah. The Seniors who use the Council on Aging services at the Howes House, prefer its current location and proximity to other Town resources. It should not be moved.
3. This scaled back approach will reduce the mass, number of bathrooms, number of other rooms and reduce the size and cost of related code complying requirements.
4. This new concept will be designed in a manner that complies with the character of the Historic District and the Historic District Commission's (HDC) architectural guidelines. The MVC will then also most likely support the project if it has the endorsement of the HDC.
5. Separately, if new work space is needed for additional non-COA programming, what are these programs, how often will they take place, will additional staff be needed and can the Library or public safety building help with providing activity space?

Have a larger public discussion of other general space needs the Town may have—rather than try to include them in this project. I do not know what they are. If the Town agrees more structural space is needed, consider adding it onto the back of firehouse # 1 or onto the firehouse lot on the West Tisbury Edgartown Road. Can we better utilize the existing meeting space in Town at the Library or perhaps public safety building? To date we have devoted all available Town land and open space for housing.

Finance: This is a proposed \$10 million capital spending project that requires more transparent and open thought as to its priority in light of an upcoming \$100 million West Tisbury school project - \$80 million of which will be West Tisbury's obligation (80%); a \$250-\$300 million high school project that we will need to fund in accordance with an apparent new cost sharing formula; the unfunded OPEB liabilities of the high school and Up-Island Regional School District; on-going needs for new ambulances

of which West Tisbury will need to fund a significantly larger amount in accordance with the new Tri-Town ambulance cost sharing agreement; the shared cost of the Tri-Town Ambulance building in Chilmark. These are just a few projects that are on the short term table. The Fincom admittedly did not scrutinize the Howes House project in terms of its cost and impact on our taxes. An honest mistake. We have many large, long term debt issues that are beyond the scope and capacity of the internal capital improvements planning committee and require serious long term, public discussion.

The Chilmark Tri-Town Ambulance building cost sharing formula was developed and formally approved by the Aquinnah and West Tisbury Select Boards. West Tisbury voters also approved the concept of sharing the cost of this building with Chilmark and Aquinnah. The ribbon cutting ceremony will take place today, July 12, 2023.