

With the Howes House building committee speeding diligently toward their assigned goal, the Town has been presented with an abundance of new information and insight that was not available just a few months ago. The project that is now being contemplated and discussed has come a long way from the repairs and upgrades originally recommended by the building inspector. It may be a good time to take a few breaths and review some important questions.

It is reasonable, for example, to ask: How does an \$4-\$8 million project fit within town priorities? At the Spring 2022 Town Meeting and on the ballot, voters approved \$500k+ "for the purpose of supporting the next phase of the Howes House renovation/reconstruction." However, scale and nature of the project have drifted beyond the scope of what voters were led to expect in April when they approved the funding. At the time, voters had been presented with a question that referenced only the Howes House building, not senior needs. The focus group study suggests that the two are not synonymous in people's minds, and that many in our town know the Howes House primarily from experiences unrelated to elder services.

If senior needs are indeed what the town meant to address when they approved Question 2 and Article 19, a less costly approach to solving the Howes House dilemma might be to think administratively rather than architecturally. Obviously, the building has access and maintenance issues that need to be addressed. Beyond these immediate concerns, there have been several ideas of how to reimagine the configuration of Howes House, Library and Field Gallery that address the desire to create a community center for West Tisbury despite the constraints of the limited space on these sites.

One idea presented by Ginny Jones is to build a small office building on the Field Gallery property for senior services (three offices, private entrance) and reconfigure Howes House for totally community-wide uses. This harkens back to the time when Ginny's family donated the property to the Town, under a memorandum of understanding in which an envisioned use was as a "recreation center."

Another concept is to renovate Howes House as part of an interactive community campus with activities for younger aging adults (55+) thru 90+ including after school, early evening and weekend programs. A Program Director could work with both the library and the COA to implement the numerous possibilities to breathe new life into this town owned building. Senior services (COA) could continue to be provided by offices in the building and paid for by the three up island towns.

Another possibility is to formally integrate senior programming, now overseen by the Council on Aging, with library offerings. This would allow the COA to concentrate their energies on one-on-one senior services, which they are so good at doing, and which require no more than office space. It would support the campus concept of services with more than a shared parking lot. Programs for elders, at the library, has several distinct advantages:

- It puts senior programming under the purview of the Library, which is well-staffed and has extensive experience in terms of outreach, publicity, organization, and such fine points as knowing how to set up a movie or a sound system.
- It brings senior programming into a multigenerational building, so the requested age integration could happen seamlessly.
- The Library has no “old age” stigma, so many more people would be likely to give senior programming a try. (It needn’t even be labeled as such.)
- The Library has two supporting organizations that harness private funding, so the programming could be better-funded.

And finally:

- Transition to this new system could begin immediately, even before construction on Howes House begins. Thus, Howes House (from a senior programming standpoint) would barely be missed during its closure.

These ideas illustrate a few of the many possibilities to consider in plans for the Howes House renovation. They are supported by the focus group study, where people desired a wide variety of inter-generational programming. They illustrate the importance of careful study and priority setting for a project of this magnitude. When the center of town is viewed as a campus, a wider perspective allows for creative solutions. It is up to the town to direct the architect/design team in what should be included in the Howes House renovation to meet present and future needs. Let’s not miss out on this exciting opportunity.

#### A TIME TO PAUSE?

All of the above suggests taking a brief pause to make the best use of architectural and owner’s representative expenditures. Let’s decide together what needs can best be met by the Howes House and what other resources (with a capital “R”) can we plan to expend and where should they be deployed?

Even more broadly, this moment is a wonderful opportunity for West Tisbury to decide important options for the town center and for our community. The Howes House focus groups and power point presentation demonstrate the value of public engagement and the inclusion of a wide range of perspectives.

- Town Visioning was highly successful and engaging—25 years ago
  - Over 200 people shared ideas for the future of West Tisbury
  - Five priorities resulted in working groups
  - The unique West Tisbury historic character was a particularly eloquent part of the visioning report.
  - 25 years later, it is time for an update

- Space Needs Study (2007) is an important example of a successful planning approach. It accomplished two important objectives
  - Created a prioritized plan for overall future town space needs
  - Studied specific town hall needs and three alternative scenarios
 The result was that voters could make an informed decision on Town Hall options.
  
- In 2022, many projects compete for our limited financial resources and space. The outcomes of these decisions directly affect the character of West Tisbury.
  - Howes House renovation
  - Grange Hall use
  - Ag Society building and grounds use
  - Stillpoint proposal
  - Polly Hill staff housing
  - Affordable housing
  - Brad Tucker’s farm stand is private property, but the way in which his proposal is treated should reflect whether or not it is a good “fit” for the town’s unique personality and not based on a popularity contest.
  
- Are there future needs that should to be considered?
  - Major improvements, upgrades, increased space to/in existing buildings?
  - Having a community center that would function much like Chilmark’s?
  - School needs?
  - Mill Pond dam/pond?
  - Cemetery?
  - Transfer station?
  
- While the need to review town regulations as illustrated by food truck proposals, wedding venues and the challenges of short-term rentals is not necessarily a space issue, it illustrates the importance of a broad and holistic planning effort. How does the current economy fit into existing bylaws and regulations? Are changes needed? What are the positives and negatives of these changes for the character of West Tisbury?

Several planning initiatives could be undertaken without adding years to this project. A broad-based space needs study, building on known physical conditions of buildings and matching those with future needs; an up-dated visioning process; and, longer-term, creation of a long-range planning advisory committee so that individual town efforts don’t happen in a vacuum.

The architect/design firm contracted for the Howes House should welcome concrete, comprehensive direction that takes into consideration how this project fits into the entire town center design.