

**Re: Town of Wheelock Report to the US Department of Justice**

**Date: November 16, 2020**

**To: Julia Torti, Chief, Civil Division, Assistant US Attorney [Julia.Torti@usdoj.gov](mailto:Julia.Torti@usdoj.gov)**

**From: Ann Lawless, Town of Wheelock Selectboard [alawless@vtlink.net](mailto:alawless@vtlink.net)**

**Enclosed: Wheelock panels**

Attorney Torti:

Since we last were in touch in August, Wheelock people at many levels have been working very hard to resolve the ADA issues at Town Hall. Here is our report.

**FACILITIES TASK FORCE** This volunteer group is very active with research and plans. They have researched all past proposals and considered new out-of-the-box ideas. They meet monthly (at least), and report to the Selectboard. The latest idea is to raise up the existing 1871 historic town building, replace the existing basement underneath it, and put it back down at ground level on a new frost wall. This would eliminate the need for stairs, ramps and lifts. An addition at the side, or a new, separate building, would provide space similar to the meeting room, clerk's office, and small kitchen now in the basement, and also for accessible washrooms. Although the Task Force does not have any money to spend yet, it has lined up architect Jay Ancel, Black River Design, to develop these two different schematics as soon as funds are available.

**COMMUNICATIONS TASK FORCE** This group is keeping a low profile officially, but the communications tools put in place earlier are ongoing:

- Monthly, 2 page print newsletter ***The Millers Run*** available in weather-proof boxes at Town Hall, Wheelock Store and the transfer station, and posted at <https://wheelockcmtv.org/themillersrun>
- Regular posts on Front Porch Forum and a Facebook "Wheelock Current Events" page.
- Task Force meeting minutes at the new town website <https://townofwheelockvt.org>
- Wheelock Community Initiative e-news at least monthly with updates and links to ***The Millers Run***

**SURVEY** The Hazard Mitigation Survey was mailed to all Wheelock taxpayers in early September with the tax bills, and launched on-line as well. The purpose was to gather voters' opinions about the Town Hall situation. A whopping 70 surveys were returned. The October 10 tally of 62 is as follows:

- Most important factor 73% of respondents said cost
- If costs were equal what's the preference 48% update existing building 52% build new

- Is a community kitchen important? 74% said yes
- What should the town do with the building? Sell 39% Keep 27% Rent 18% Other 16%. Some said they needed more info.

**GRANTS** The Municipal Planning Grant is key, as one of the few funding sources available for outreach, communications and planning. We hope to use the funds to engage Jay Ancel to develop schematic drawings for the two options as above, **in time to present them at Town Meeting 2021** to get a preference from the voters. This is not required in our agreement with you but we don't want to miss the opportunity. We hope to engage a consultant to help coordinate outreach and grants. Our suggested pick recently worked with the Town of Barnet on their Municipal Planning Grant. A first step will be a Zoom call with our suggested pick and the Facilities Task Force.

We have begun outreach to Northern Counties Investment Corporation. [www.ncic.org](http://www.ncic.org), for help with project development, grant writing and grants management. We are following many more funders than on the list below and will contact them as the deadlines approach.

	Funder	Matching funds req'd?	Award notification	Project description	Start - Finish dates
<b>FUNDED</b>					
	Smart Growth	NO	9/30/2020 <b>\$1,000 Awarded!</b>	Fall 2020 outdoor community meeting	10/1/20 to 9/30/21
	Smart Growth	NO	Awarded! Cash coming soon	Food, masks for fall meeting	Fall 2020
	VT Community Foundation NEK Fund	NO	10/16/2020 <b>\$2,200 Awarded!</b>	Community outreach/meetings	12/1/20 to 11/30/21
<b>SUBMITTED &amp; PENDING</b>					
	Municipal Planning Grant	YES - 10% use Smart Growth & VCF NEK	12/31/2020 \$20,633 Requested	Outreach, facilitation, grant writing, tech assistance (architect/engineering/historic preservation)	1/1/20 to 6/30/22
<b>RECENTLY RESEARCHED – there are more funders but we need architectural plans first</b>					
	Preservation Trust of VT, Bruhn Fund	Too soon. This is for bricks and mortar. Annual deadline late fall. \$50,000 to \$100,000. No match required. 15 yr. preservation easement required.			
	USDA Rural Development VT	Too soon. Must have schematic drawings in hand. Unless the census numbers improve for 2020 and we get relatively poorer, we would need to provide 85% of the project budget as cost share and get only 15% in grants. They also have loans.			

**THE PANDEMIC**

This horrible situation, compounded by insufficient broadband, is adversely affecting everything we do, from Selectboard meetings, Task Force meetings and our recent outdoor meeting, to plans for Town Meeting. We fear it may set back our progress on this project. Many people here do not have functional internet because it is not available at any cost. A lot of people try to access the internet using their cell phones. We have a digital divide, with many older residents unfamiliar with the technology. The Selectboard will be following guidelines from the VT League of Cities and Towns. We don't have enough room for Covid spacing inside Town Hall. Even if the Selectboard voted to move to Australian ballot to pass the annual town budget, there is no building in town sufficiently large to hold the required information meeting. A remote hearing is permissible, but participation will be limited.

**OUTDOOR GATHERING**

On October 24, the Facilities Task Force organized an outdoor presentation, using funds from the Smart Growth grant. The five 4' x 3' panels in the photo below presented information about the Dept. of Justice agreement, Town Hall, Town Garage, the survey, and funding. The entire Task Force was available to share information and answer questions. We provided free, local food for take home. We did quite a bit of promotion, but it was a cold windy day, and not surprising that few people attended. More photos are available at <https://wheelockcmtv.org/gallery-1>.



Thank you for your patience, and we will keep in touch with updates as the project moves forward.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ann Lawless".

Ann Lawless,

on behalf of the Town of Wheelock Selectboard of which I am a member