



TOWN OF STRATHAM

INCORPORATED 1716

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October 22, 2017

Dear Board of Selectmen:

The Heritage Commission, cognizant of its mission and responsibility to preserve and protect Stratham's historical resources, has for many years been concerned about the future of the Old Town Hall. Up to this point we have declined making any overtures to current owner David Short about purchasing the property, but it now appears the only option available if it is to be saved.

The Old Town Hall was, after many years of deliberation, constructed in 1877 by two Stratham men, Charles and Hezekiah Leavitt. Built in the French-derived Second Empire style it is unusual, and possibly unique, among New Hampshire town halls. For more than a century it was the center of the governmental, cultural, and social life in Stratham. Its vacancy in the 1990s and ultimate sale to David Short in 1997 is recounted in Stratham at 300 ("The Sad Demise of the Old Town Hall", pp 109-112).

In the past decade there have been numerous efforts to focus attention on the historical significance of the Old Town Hall:

- 1.) The Heritage Commission included it in our historical context contribution to the (unfortunately never-completed) Town Center Master Plan.
- 2.) The Town's efforts to revitalize the Town Center district brought renewed focus to the important historical resources that still survive, key among them the Old Town Hall. The preface to the 2011 Plan New Hampshire report on the community charrette listed two of the three "key concerns" that emerged from the process as "*Creation of a unique sense of place...*" and "*Re-establish the historic significance, character, and connection of the Town Center within the community.*" Citizen responses to questions posed during the listening sessions drew forth comments on the regrettable condition of attractive and historic buildings in the Town Center, and a wish to see those buildings properly cared for. Lack of input from property owners was cited but the report concluded that "*The sense of history, especially the existence of older buildings that populate the District, is still evident.*" (p.14) The report recommended a development approach that "*honors [Stratham's] historical past while accommodating the changing fabric of the community's character, needs and desires.*" (p. 15)

- 3.) In 2014 the Stratham Town Center Area Form (a formal survey of the district's historic resources) was issued as part of the grant-supported Town Center streetscape improvements. That report cited the historical and architectural significance of the Old Town Hall, listing it as one of the seven buildings in the area that merited further research and documentation.
- 4.) Hoping to increase public understanding of the historical significance of the Old Town Hall, the Heritage Commission submitted an illustrated article written by then-chairman Rebecca Mitchell, "Stratham's Old Town Hall, 1878-1990," which appeared in the May 2015 issue of *Stratham* magazine.
- 5.) With Mr. Short's agreement, in 2016 the Heritage Commission hired and worked with a consultant to research and prepare the necessary inventory form to nominate the Old Town Hall to the NH Register of Historic Places. The nomination established that the Old Town Hall is eligible for listing on the NH Register because of its significant "*association with town government and entertainment/recreation*" and because it is a "*modest but unique local example of French Second Empire*" architecture that retains much of its original features. (The Old Town Hall would have been eligible for the National Register of Historic Places except for the fact that it is currently clad in vinyl siding, which disqualifies a property from National Register eligibility.) After the Old Town Hall was determined eligible for listing by the state Historical Council, the property owner declined to have it listed in spite of the fact that he understands that listing places no restrictions on an owner's actions.

Over the past two years the Heritage Commission has communicated with Mr. Short numerous times expressing our interest in and concern for the future of the Old Town Hall. We have focused our efforts on attempting to attract his interest in a preservation easement, recognizing that the Town doesn't necessarily want to own the building outright again. As recently as last month, he expressed the desire to potentially execute an easement deal to facilitate a lower sale price for his current tenant to purchase the property. But more recently he has dismissed that idea.

We offered to expend Heritage Preservation Fund money to match a potential NH Preservation Alliance grant for a formal assessment of the structure and the feasibility of its potential economic re-uses. Unfortunately, he expressed no interest in pursuing this either. His recent communication indicated solely a desire to sell the Old Town Hall back to the Town.

A few days ago, Mr. Short called me to ask about the Town's demolition review procedures, and to inform me there is a new potential buyer, whose plans entail removal of the structure. He indicated that he is anxious to sell the property, and without any demonstrated interest from the Town to acquire it, he is likely to proceed with this potential sale, even though it is not the fate he wants to see for the building.

I fear the only option we have for saving the Old Town Hall is for the Town to step up and make an offer to purchase it, before Mr. Short signs an agreement with the other potential buyer. Time is of the essence! The current listing price on the Realtor's website is \$299,000 (for the Old

Town Hall by itself). The price for the Old Town Hall plus the former Baptist Parsonage (aka Millie Parker's house) is \$498,000. The asking price is not unreasonable at this point (although negotiations could potentially yield further reduction), and the two properties are both historically significant and tie together well. The two lots combined provide more long-term flexibility for potential re-uses of the Old Town Hall. The Heritage Preservation Fund has an adequate amount of money in it to make a reasonable deposit, although any sales agreement would obviously need to be contingent on Town support for funding the remaining balance. Clearly, we cannot take such dramatic action without support from the Board of Selectmen.

Our demolition delay ordinance will only buy us 30 days to document and photograph the building one last time – it will not allow us to prevent demolition.

We understand that the Town should not necessarily be in the business of buying up every threatened building in order to save it, but certainly in the case of the Old Town Hall we have an obligation to help preserve our own heritage. The purchase price is not burdensome for a Town with resources such as Stratham. Obviously there would need to be an open and inclusive discussion about what to do with it if it were to be acquired. It could be rented to a commercial tenant as it is now, it could be used for civic purposes, or it could be resold with preservation restrictions to a new buyer.

If the Board of Selectmen wants to save the building but not own it long-term, the Commission would be willing to work with NHPA on a preservation easement for the structure, and then it could be resold with permanent restrictions that would prevent demolition or unsympathetic modification by future owners.

I would hate to have this critical piece of Town history lost on our watch. I hope you will work with the Heritage Commission to take immediate action to acquire the Old Town Hall for the people of Stratham.

Becky Mitchell and I would be willing to attend your next meeting to further discuss this matter at your request.

Sincerely,



Nathan Merrill
Chairman, Heritage Commission
Chairman, Demolition Review Committee

CC: Heritage Commission, all members
Paul Deschaine, Town Administrator
Tavis Austin, Town Planner
Bob Baskerville, Planning Board Chair