



Sunday, April 11, 2021

The Future of the Meeting House:

Community Q's and A's – Part One *(updated)*

The Williamsville Village Board recently began discussing the possible sale of the Meeting House, 5658 Main St. To ensure its constituents have an open and transparent government, the Village Board is providing the community with up-to-date information regarding the Meeting House in a “Q and A” format.

Additionally, the board is aware that a new online petition, titled "Stop the Sale of the Williamsville Meeting House," is now circulating. While petitions can be an extremely useful form of providing input on a topic of concern to the Village Board – and the board can certainly consider submitted petitions while making its decisions – the ultimate determination as to whether or not to sell the Meeting House rests solely with the Village Board.

The board is stressing that this “Q and A” is only the first part in what will be a series of updates to the community regarding the Meeting House’s sale proposal. The board believes that residents should have all of the details that are available on such subjects that affect the community.

UPDATES AS OF APRIL 11: The Meeting House property was appraised by GAR Associates at a value of \$440,000. In late March, Mayor Deb Rogers and Amherst Supervisor Brian Kulpa had a brief conversation about the town’s interest in purchasing the property. Kulpa told the mayor that the town would examine the possibility as the village continues its own research regarding possible preservation covenants on the property.

Q: How frequently is the Meeting House used by the community ?

A: Although the building has been available for rentals and is booked occasionally for weddings and small community events, the Meeting House remains unoccupied throughout a large majority of the year. The building currently houses historic village artifacts that are managed by the Village of Williamsville Historical Society (although it is not a part of the municipality). The organization opens the Meeting House to the public to viewings of the artifacts and materials. The viewings are generally held in two-hour increments for one Sunday per month for 10 months of the year.

Q: Is the Meeting House Committee still active ?

A: The former Meeting House Committee (MHC) was active for more than 20 years before being dissolved last year. The committee’s main goal was to make the building a special place for community events to be held. While a lack of volunteers contributed to the MHC’s dissolution in 2020, its members at the time agreed that the committee’s mission had been achieved.

During its tenure, the committee created awareness of the Meeting House through its own marketing campaigns and hosted holiday concerts and theatre groups. Throughout a 22-year span, from 1998 through 2019, the average number of committee members was five, with some years having either one or zero members.

Although village officials assisted the committee in seeking new members through outreaches and social media campaigns, the committee’s membership numbers remained low. In the month leading to the committee’s dissolution, there were three members.

Q: Why is the Village Board examining the sale of a historic building ?

A: The structure was built in 1871 and purchased by the village in December 1978. If the property is sold, an annual financial burden of maintaining the aging building would be removed from village taxpayers. During the past 11 years, nearly \$205,000 in taxpayer money has been used to maintain the building. The village does not regularly use the Meeting House for municipal purposes.

Recent grant-funded building updates, including the restoration of the stained-glass windows in 2018, have made the Meeting House a valuable village asset. Continuing to own the building while it remains minimally used by the community conflicts with the purpose of the renovations and the careful property maintenance the village has pursued during the past 40 years.

Q: What would a change in ownership mean for the property's status ?

A: A new owner would pay taxes on the property, providing the village with an annual financial benefit due to the sale. The property's sale would allow the Meeting House to be used more frequently. If sold, the Meeting House would remain a locally designated landmark subject to oversight by the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC). As a local landmark, any significant alterations of the Meeting House property would have to be reviewed and approved by the HPC. Such approval could only be granted upon a showing by the owner that it cannot earn a reasonable return on investment, regardless of whether that return represents the most profitable return possible.

Q: What is the current status of the sale proposal ?

A: The Village of Williamsville is in process of gathering information related to aspects of a possible sale of the building. Currently, the status of the Meeting House remains unchanged, and it will still be available to rent within the current federal and state health guidelines related to the pandemic. Additionally, no sales contracts have been offered and a request for proposal (RFP) has not been issued.

As of Tuesday, March 16, 2020, village officials have:

- Hired an appraisal company to evaluate the property and provide a fair market value of the property.
- Inquired with agencies that have funded past improvement projects at the Meeting House to review any restrictions for the property. The village is currently awaiting replies from the offices of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO).
- Conducted a title search to review any possible preservation covenants on the property.

Q: Can the sale proposal appear on a voting ballot as a referendum ?

A: Under New York State law, local municipalities may only conduct referenda that are expressly authorized by statute. A referendum that is not specifically required or permitted by state statute is illegal and may not be conducted.

Q: How can village residents provide feedback to the Village Board ?

A: Residents may call Village Hall at 632-4120, email board members directly, or attend a virtual board meeting to provide feedback and offer comments regarding the proposal. Email addresses for the mayor and trustees are provided on the village's website, www.WalkableWilliamsville.com.

Residents may also mail feedback to Village Hall, 5565 Main St., Williamsville, NY 14225, or email Keaton DePriest, director of community development, at kdepriest@village.williamsville.ny.us. DePriest may also be reached directly by calling 256-1225.