

Special Town Meeting – 11/14/2022
Articles 4 & 5

It is understood that a new fire station is required and that timely response to all fire or other emergencies is a critical priority.

The Annual Town Meeting Debate Rules limiting speakers to 3 minutes prevented any detailed analysis of potential issues with the selected site. Only a fraction of the information that is important for Town Meeting members to make an informed decision could be presented. Public participation should have preceded the siting decision, but the public was shut out of the siting process, contrary to customary previous practice.

When the Local Historic District was created, Town Historian Louise K. Brown commented “The changes in the outward appearance of the old town have ... been so destructive in the last few years, that it is with a sense of security that we view the creation of the [Local Historic] District. The citizens were able to set aside a small portion of Bedford, and ... to preserve it for the enjoyment of future generations.” Town Meeting’s original intent in creating the district is clear. **The Select Board’s strategy mirrors the prior destructive actions that caused Town Meeting to adopt the special legislative act by a substantial majority.**

The National Historic Preservation Act protects properties listed in the National Register of Historic Places from damage caused by use of Federal funds on Federal or State projects. Bedford’s Select Board used Federal funds to purchase 139 TGR, which would be specifically prohibited if any State or Federal approval or oversight had been involved. Bedford is the only municipality in the Commonwealth known to have used Federal funds for a local project causing damage to a National Register District.

The need for a fire substation east of the Route 3 corridor has been on the table for years. When I was a Selectman decades ago, we hired the former State Fire Marshall, Robert Ulm, as the new Chief. He was extremely knowledgeable regarding fire safety. Development on Middlesex Turnpike was underway at the time, and Chief Ulm was clear that Bedford would need a substation in that corridor. **He said it was not a question of “If”, but of “When”.** A substation there

should have been part of the discussion since Day 1 of the new main fire station planning.

The Select Board is well aware of the situation. Hence, the Bedford Motel site is unacceptable for the fire station because it is “too far away” for rapid response to that corridor. However, the decision that 139 TGR is the better site because it is a few hundred yards closer is very subjective.

I live on the edge of town – the last house on Page Road. It is 2-1/4 miles from the Fire Station. The Fire Department must go twice as far to reach the Albion Road residential neighborhood or the school serving special-needs children and young adults on Oak Park Drive. **Those who live, work, and pay property taxes along the Middlesex Turnpike corridor don't receive the same timely response as the rest of us.** They should at least have an opportunity to be heard.

An independent impartial needs assessment should be conducted, and the issue brought to Town Meeting for debate. **Approval of a Town Meeting article for a substation could open the door for consideration of more advantageous sites.** Neither Lexington's nor Concord's main fire station is close to historic buildings in their town centers because both have substations. Burlington and Billerica have substations to protect their residents and properties along the Turnpike corridor, but Bedford has none. **The Select Board has stifled public debate on the issue, and clearly intends to just “kick that can down the road”.**

There are serious drawbacks and substantial site preparation costs for the 139 TGR site that are avoidable elsewhere. **PHOTO 1**

The historic stone wall along the front of the property would be removed and the front grade cut by 2 to 3 feet just to meet street grade. The driveway goes up to about 8 feet above street grade behind the building, and the front yard also slopes up about 8 feet across the lot. Depending on the intended elevation of the fire station relative to street grade, massive cutting and regrading will be required, with blasting if ledge or bedrock are encountered. Installation of reinforced concrete retaining walls will also be required. The result will be a 4-bay fire station facing the street next to a high concrete retaining wall, with paving covering much of the front of the lot. **As well as being costly, damage to the value of surrounding National Register properties and damage to the character**

and integrity of the Historic District will be significant and irreversible. Select Board minutes reveal that even town officials had concerns with the shape and grade of the site and slope at the exit. The same minutes quote a Select Board member, “If we choose 139 TGR, the argument will be for financial responsibility ... If we choose 175 TGR, the argument is for the **IDEAL site for long-term investment and future needs.**”

Mass DOT safety guidance would probably warrant a traffic signal at the Hillside Ave./Bacon Road intersection under current conditions. If the fire station is moved to 139 TGR, that signal would seem to be essential for blocking traffic to allow fire trucks to safely enter and leave the station. The town’s traffic study consultant recommended “additional improvements both at the Hillside/Bacon intersection and up the road to minimize disruption from the fire station. Some of that ... may involve signalization.” **The cost and inconvenience of another signal and “additional improvements ... up the road” have never been discussed publicly by the Board.**

The utility poles in front of 139 TGR are another issue on which the Select Board has been completely silent. **The poles obstructing the entrance would be difficult for the fire engines to navigate around and create a hazard, so unless and until the poles are removed, the site seems unusable for the fire station.** However, removal of those poles would be difficult and costly. When the road from Loomis to Hillside was widened to provide a center turning lane, all the utility poles first had to be removed and the overhead wiring buried along that roadway. Bedford’s General Bylaws state the limits of the project – **poles and overhead wires are forbidden from the east sideline of Walsh Road to a point 160 feet west of Bacon Road - directly in front of 139 TGR.** The poles are next to large cast iron underground utility vaults where the buried wires are brought back overhead. **PHOTOS 2&3** These photos show the metal sleeves protecting some of the wires on each pole. Several weeks ago, a third pole was installed to brace the pole near the center of the site. **PHOTOS 4&5**

Relocation of the poles to a different end point would require another overhead wire burial project. The original project was extremely difficult due to the number of wires and wire owners, and it ran many months beyond the scheduled completion date. **After that project was completed, the Select Board voted that burial of overhead wires would not be considered on future Great Road**

projects. Companies owning the overhead wires will almost certainly be extremely reluctant to participate in a new overhead wire burial project involving the same difficult conditions and with no public benefit. They may well flatly refuse. **The bottom line is that a project to remove the wires and poles at 139 TGR would be costly and would delay construction of a fire station there by years, if ever, compared to construction at any other site.**

Articles 4 and 5 propose to establish an independent impartial citizen study committee that would allow the public, for the first time, to discuss and review the merits and drawbacks of alternative advantageous sites and to stop expenditures on 139 TGR pending the findings. For example, if firm commitments cannot be obtained from every owner for expeditious removal of their overhead wires from the poles at 139 TGR, or if Town Meeting should approve a substation east of the Route 3 corridor to reduce response time there, **the committee's recommendations would allow expedited approval of an alternate site for the new fire station.**

The committee composition is modeled on the former DPW Facility Study Committee. The DPW Manager and architect worked closely with that committee, and the Select Board and Town Manager had little involvement. Rich Bowen as Chair represented the committee at Town Meetings. That committee was effective in planning a very functional and aesthetically attractive building.

The Moderator will make appointments to the committee, as past Moderators have done with earlier committees established by Town Meeting. He can reach out to the Volunteer Coordinating Committee for help in finding candidates for this committee. I had no conversation with the Moderator in drafting this article, and he only learned of his responsibility at a recent Select Board meeting.

In closing, in addition to the significant drawbacks that I have discussed, the HDC could in time deny a demolition permit for 139 TGR. These questions make proceeding with the Select Board's agenda seem ill-advised. The sooner other plans are explored, the sooner a true solution can be found. **139 The Great Road is not the bargain it's been represented to be.**