

February 8, 2023

Town of Bedford Select Board
10 Mudge Way
Bedford, MA 01730

To all Board Members via the Online Contact Form

Re: The New Fire Station

Dear Select Board Members,

Since I wrote to you last July, hoping to advance alternative sites for the new fire station, I have followed developments closely. Now more than ever, I am convinced that a far better location exists. And I think it is a good bet that if a viable location, one that would be less damaging to the Historic District, came to light, a *super* “super-majority” would favor it now.

Many Bedford residents believe that the search for the site has been exhaustive – and people on both sides of the controversy are surely exhausted – but as the old saying goes, ***whether you think you can or you think you can't, you are right***. Even though efforts to settle on a new fire station site have been going on in earnest since 2015, it does not necessarily follow that all potential locations have been considered. And Bedford deserves nothing less.

I have been waiting for the preservationist’s report to be published in order to address the matter comprehensively. Now that I have had the chance to look through the impressively extensive forensic review I have the same questions I had before I read it. Whether it was built in 1836 or a mere hundred years ago, the presumption that the house is what is standing in the way of the construction has always baffled me. (That is why I chose the name *SaveOurBlock.org*.)

Aside from the scar a concrete expanse would carve into the face of the historic block, the ballooning expense and extensive delays that would be inevitable if the utility poles do have to be moved, as well as the ever-present possibility that the Historic District Commissioners will not find that they can approve the project, make examining other options imperative. If the Stewart Laboratory had not become available, what then? Would there be no new station?

The strange circumstances surrounding the pandemic clouded and distorted the process. The crucial phase of allowing townspeople a chance to weigh in on the big picture before anything was officially endorsed was a casualty of the lockdown as it pushed residents into their corners when they needed to brainstorm and reason together. They still do.

I am sending you this proposal in the hope of persuading you to rethink the wisdom of the plan you are promoting. It really is not too late to do the right thing if the town would be better served by correcting course. Since you are pledged to “represent the entire community at all times,” I hope you will agree with that conclusion.

RENOVATE THE CURRENT FIRE STATION TO SERVE AS A SUBSTATION

As Don Corey pointed out, the response time to the Northeast Quadrant is far in excess of what most other Bedford residents can count on. Converting the existing station into a substation, once the new station is functioning, would provide coverage – particularly EMS services – to West, North, and South Bedford ***while permitting the main station to be located further to the East than would otherwise be possible.***

Renovating a building on land that the Town already owns would be a cost-effective way to extend service without the sort of tab that has been cited as a prime reason for not considering a substation in the foreseeable future. It would also protect the character of Bedford Center. The Preservation Collaborative noted that the fire station has always been within sight of the Common and concluded: “It is important to note that the loss of the fire department to the district would be a major blow to the district’s overarching integrity...”

BUILD THE NEW STATION IN THE GREAT ROAD SHOPPING CENTER VICINITY

There are a couple of very promising sites for a beautiful new station. The Shawsheen Funeral Home lot size at 281 The Great Road is 74,000 square feet and the large parking lot in the image below suggests that any wetlands should not be a problem. The assessed value is \$815,400. It is convenient to East Bedford, South Bedford via Loomis Street, and is equidistant between the two access roads to North, Northwest, and Northeast Bedford.

It is possible that the Dillens would be open to selling to the Town. As a longtime Bedford family – as opposed to the TD Bank building owner – they might be happy to be part of a great solution to the fire station dilemma.

The family might be interested in an outright sale. Or they might agree to being relocated. The bungalow lot just west of the funeral home might be available for that purpose.



The other site is the Bedford Car Wash location. The property is valued at \$714,800 and the lot size is 28,750 square feet. Figuring in the current station, the lot size might be fine. But if needed, it could be joined to the property to the east, for which I found no entry in the Assessor's database. The visual on the next page shows how amazing that could be.



Both the street view and the overhead view suggest that the shape of the Bedford Car Wash site could offer ample space for a terrific station. If the bays face the street, the lot could easily accommodate three bays. Facing the shopping center parking lot there is no limit. But joining the two lots would certainly be a major upgrade to The Great Road visually and everything displaced could be moved across the Shawsheen into the deserted

end of the Stop and Shop parking lot. That shouldn't be hard to negotiate with Stop and Shop since it would draw cars into their lot and probably to their store.



It is unlikely that either of these two options would require an eminent domain action or have the grounds to successfully defeat one. There would be no downside to moving the car wash into the adjacent parking lot, and nothing but an upside for Stop and Shop. Meanwhile, finding a suitable location for the Funeral Home, if a move is required, should not be hard to accomplish.

I doubt that anyone could claim that 139 The Great Road would be superior to either of these two sites and hope that anyone who rejects the proposal would respectfully share their concrete reasons *why*.

Since response time, expense, and feasibility were the prime considerations in settling on 139 The Great Road, wouldn't a site that could be opened sooner and that is superior on all counts have to be considered now?

I think this is the sort of brainstorming that was envisioned in the Special Town Meeting Petitioners' Warrant Articles. It could be that putting this proposal out will prompt other possibilities to open up. Any delay that would be caused could be made up for by adopting a straightforward solution instead of the current problematic and uncertain plan.

I believe it is safe to say that no one would prefer the current plan to an attractive, less complicated, and less destructive alternative.

I remember that at the October Finance Committee meeting, where the members discussed whether or not to make a recommendation on Articles 4 & 5, Abigail Siebert noted that whenever initiatives have been delayed in the past, it always proved beneficial in the end.

Of course, the decision that night was to make no recommendation. That in itself was a reason to put the brakes on, but when Don Corey revealed the severe challenges that the utility poles in front of 139 TGR could pose, it inevitably raised the question of whether the original Finance Committee recommendation in March would have/could have been made under those circumstances. And without that recommendation, it is doubtful that the “super-majority” that was secured *by three votes* would have been achieved.

The entire heated controversy has rested on whether or not there were options. Those who believed there were none – because that is what the Town assured them – were understandably impatient to move forward. Those who believed there were other options, who wanted to protect the integrity of the historic block and were willing to fight for it were treated harshly as a result.

A Letter to the Editor in yesterday’s *Bedford Citizen* claimed that less than a third of voters in attendance in November supported the Petitioners’ Articles. **But one can only imagine how that would have changed if the Moderator had applied the same standard for secret balloting to Articles 4 and 5 that he applied to Article 10.**

Short-circuiting the process, *when the conditions requiring a secret vote exist*, because it would take too long is blatantly undemocratic. There was no defensible reason for the extra threshold for separate approval of secret balloting, since it was not required for Article 10. **Why was that?** Requiring a public vote to authorize a secret vote on a matter that is so fraught with emotion was inexplicable. How could such a result be taken seriously? Imagine what voters would do to a legislature that passed major legislation based on whether or not the procedure was convenient for them. I am not minimizing the real-world challenge of late weeknights but think that making a secret vote dependent on the results of a public vote guaranteed the outcome.

Since you have invited public comment on the Town Meeting structure, I would suggest that, for instance, everyone could have been given three secret ballots at registration. A sufficient number of poll workers could have quickly passed a box with slots for the votes and non-votes and then the votes could have been counted while the next Article was being presented. At the end, everyone could have left at least half an hour earlier and all three vital issues would have been assured an honest result. Whatever the State constraints, I hope you will put something that works in place for the future.

Finally, the plunge into the building’s past is very interesting, but **concentrating on the house does not make the damage to the block any less glaring.** If the lot were

empty, tearing up and grading the wide front lawn would still be drastic and manifestly “unsuitable” (in Historic District vernacular.) The report’s description of the retaining wall lacked imagination. Writing it off as just the work of Jerome Bacon’s third wife misses the fact that she moved to town when she was twenty-two and more than thirty years later must have had a good feel for the property. The fact that the wall is an extension of the one that fronts the Bacon mansion attests to the linkage that existed in her mind at the time and presumably in the community at-large. It seems to have been meant to convey the message that it was an integral part of the Bacon’s domain and that should not be minimized now.

The fact that it has been a prominent fixture of the streetscape approaching Bedford Center for a hundred years is nothing to lightly brush aside. It certainly seems to deserve its status as a “Contributing” structure in the National Register. **The radical grading and cement slab that will disfigure the charming block no matter how much mitigation is done should have been shared and thoroughly discussed at the 2022 Annual Town Meeting before the votes were cast.**

Regarding the future of 139 TGR: If plans for the station do change, I have heard and read enthusiastic and imaginative comments regarding alternate uses for the Bacon property. The picture of the house on page 27 of the report, without the aluminum storm door and with the porch awning extended, shows how elegant an asset – whether flipped or refinanced.

In closing, I chose the retaining wall as the theme of the SaveOurBlock website because it is a retaining wall in more than just the physical sense. Opposition to the current plan is not arbitrary or “sour grapes” – it is based on well-founded concerns that if not shared should at least be respected. I think there is a strong chance that the HDC firewall that citizens worked hard to established for just such a challenge is likely to hold. And if it does, I hope you will help everyone to come together. There is no *community* without unity.

Henry David Thoreau observed that “**It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.**” I will close as I did last July, hoping that this perspective from afar will offset the disadvantages of standing up too close.

Respectfully,

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Electronic copies to: Town Manager Sarah Stanton, Chief David Grunes, HDC Commissioners