

April 24, 2024

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

Re: Open Letter to the Town of Bedford

Dear Select Board Members,

At the Historic District Commission meeting on February 7th, Commissioner Sal Canciello explained his January 3rd vote against approving 139 The Great Road as the appropriate site for the new fire station. His statement was extensive, but one comment stood out:

“What we needed was a professional study that eliminated all other sites,” said Canciello, an architect. Now, he said, “We have a gun to our heads. If we don’t approve this, we are stopping the fire station.”

That disturbing statement distilled virtually *all of the opposition* to the 2022 acquisition and all of the dissension and hard feelings it spawned. It was found in the sixteenth paragraph of the February 8th *Bedford Citizen* report on the hearing. In another publication, it might have made the headline.

Never before has a Massachusetts town’s Select Board targeted a “contributing” element in its own historic district – one of the State’s first. The Town’s justification was that it was the only alternative site to the expensive TD property that would maintain current response time coverage while saving time and “a whole lotta money”. Was that true?

If it was, the HDC Commissioners could have felt free to grant the waiver to proceed knowing that they had done their duty under the law that they were appointed to administer and had sworn an oath to uphold.

If the carriage house and streetscape had to go to protect the public good, it would have been easy to quiet opposition. But no evidence that the site selection was the result of a diligent review was ever offered and no effort was ever made to convince skeptics with proof instead of generalities.

According to presentations leading up to the 2022 vote, the Select Board “requested staff to reevaluate sites, including historic and residential properties” in the winter of 2020-2021. But numerous Public Records Requests have failed to produce a shred of paper to back that up. Where is the evidence that a “detailed, thoughtful, and appropriate process” did take place?

If the Select Board’s stated rationale for purchasing the current site cannot be verified, then the people of Bedford should know that before being asked to approve a bond issue for a project that went from a projected \$16 million in March 2022 to a projected \$25-30 in April 2024.

Those who attended the 2022 Annual Town Meeting were told that they were voting to save \$6 million and the time and expense of “taking” the TD Bank site by eminent domain. But they weren’t told that the rigorous Historic District process could take at least as long.

At the same time, voters were assured that “If there's a site in town within our radius for response time, we've looked at it.” They had no idea that not one of the other owners on the interactive map of Site Candidates was ever approached.

In other words: If the Town manipulated information and misled voters (and still only won approval by what *The Bedford Citizen* said the next day was “the slimmest of margins”) that radically undermines the legitimacy of the entire project and puts the ethical basis for any expenditure of such a magnitude in doubt.

People can differ about the sanctity of a historic district, but not about the sanctity of the vote. Especially with tens of millions of dollars at stake. Before asking voters to commit to funding its development, officials have a duty to lift the cloud over the project with straight answers to some straight questions.

Before you meet on Monday to “digest fire station costs” (in the words of the *Citizen*) ask yourselves the following:

- How likely is it that the vote to acquire the Bacon property would have passed if voters had known there was nothing to show that any other properties had been vetted?
- How likely is it that there would have been no new fire station if the article had failed?
- Why didn’t the Town advertise a “Request for Interest” in early 2021 after the Select Board asked the Town Manager's Office to reevaluate sites – or even before?
- Would establishing a universe of options have hurt or helped the Town’s competitive advantage?
- Isn’t it strange that there was not a single progress report or email from the Town Manager’s Office to the Select Board regarding the reevaluation of sites?
- Doesn’t the Open Meeting Law require “deliberations on which public policy is based” to be shared and evaluated in a transparent manner – at least in retrospect?
- Wouldn’t residents be surprised to learn that the new fire station was not mentioned once in the Select Board Executive Session minutes of 2021 until October 25th?
- How much will it cost and how long will it take to clear the site of trees and remove tons of soil?
- How much will it cost and how long will it take to move the telephone poles?

- How much is the required signalization expected to cost?
- Why weren't those costs mentioned in presentations to the Finance and Capital Expenditure Committees in 2022 before getting their recommendations to approve the purchase?
- Why weren't those inevitable costs added to the cost of the property when it was presented to voters?
- How could the project ever have been said to present a savings of either time or money?
- How much time and expense could have been saved by choosing a less complicated site?
- Without the drawbacks above, could it have been possible to begin construction a year ago?

The purpose of this letter is not to assign blame but to seek accountability. How else can there be a learning curve? Without lessons learned, the last two bitterly contentious years were wasted. But no matter how much time and money have been spent, they will only be misspent if the result in the end, falls short of what it could still be.

There is no evidence to suggest that the Select Board selected the current site. There is much evidence to suggest that the Town Manager's Office was running the show and scripting a narrative that the Select Board accepted. At the same time, there can be no exaggerating the effect of the pandemic on the process and all involved.

The apparent reasons behind what transpired – that most closely track with the evidence -- is that Sarah Stanton decided to do whatever it took to resolve a bad situation with no end in sight. However, with presumably good intentions, she conducted the process as if the ends would justify the means.

Those means included: Presenting the situation as not just unpleasant and unworthy but dire; blatantly misrepresenting the site selection process; fostering division and confusion; putting tremendous pressure on Chief Grunes, and deliberately backing the Town's own Historic District Commission into a corner.

When the HDC met on February 21st, and Commissioner Canciello voted to give the Town conditional approval to take the project forward after his persuasive objections two weeks before, that strategy seemed to have succeeded.

The design team had done an admirable job of trying to make the plan fit into its surroundings, but the revisions had little effect on his stated core objections that the scale of the facility would overpower its surroundings and "negatively impact the Bedford Center Historic District."

Even though Mr. Canciello made no statement as to why he changed his vote, it is fair to assume that he decided that he couldn't stand on principle if it meant cutting the town in two. He may not have seen any other way out of the mess, but that does not mean there isn't one.

Supporters of the current project often warn against allowing “the perfect to be the enemy of the good.” But wouldn’t settling for the current troubled project amount to allowing the mediocre to be the enemy of the good? After more than a generation in the making, is this really what 30 million dollars looks like?

It doesn’t seem possible that it was all a big mistake. The Massachusetts Undersecretary of Economic Strategies, who teaches Public Finance at B.U., has proven herself to be anything but incompetent and a consummate pro. If the new fire station agenda was her design, she should own it. But even if it was just a series of errors in judgment, the whole town should not have to pay for it for decades to come with no effort to find options.

Residents of the future will be paying for the decisions the Town makes now. Before putting your name on this project by recommending approval, it would be good to seriously consider that this construction may not be in the public interest after all, as unpleasant as that realization may seem. And yet, acknowledging it could be the surest way to a community solution that everyone can support and celebrate.

Much has been made of the public safety concerns involved, but the State Supreme Court has ruled that protecting historic districts is a “public interest” as well. Competing public interests have to be reconciled and the only way to do that is by giving voters unvarnished facts and letting them decide how to vote without coaching.

It is easy to take Bedford’s Historic District for granted, but if the last sixty years could be unwound and people could see what a difference it has made to the face of the town they love today, they might feel very differently about this project. They might feel very grateful to those who fought to establish it and all who have faithfully served it.

Advocates of this plan insist that public safety trumps everything else. But while the current Fire Department need is very urgent, it is not truly critical. As Lt. Mark Daly, the president of the Professional Firefighters Local said last fall, referring to the current firehouse: “We would be willing to stay here rather than build at the wrong location.”

He also said at the February 7th HDC hearing: “I don’t like to see the fear-mongering – we need to do this... we need to do [that]... It’s not a great location. The architect’s doing his best job possible....” Future recruitment and retention are indeed at stake if conditions are not greatly improved, but there are fine men and women protecting Bedford in the meantime. And in the long term, the better the solution, the better off they will be.

Bedford has a wonderful new Town Manager and a promising new Fire Chief who are trying to make the best of the hands they were dealt. They would probably both love not to see the gracious slope torn up, the beautiful trees cut down, and the wrecking of what could easily be turned into a signature Town property at a bargain price.

It would be a safe bet that if the 2022 ATM voters had known the facts contained in this letter, the current project would never have passed. Give the Special Town Meeting voters in June all the information they need. At the very least, take Bill Moonan's professional advice and provide a scale model for people to actually see what they are getting into. And then, hold the vote by secret ballot.

Most importantly, give the people a choice. Because, as Justice Brandeis proclaimed: *The highest public office is that of private citizen.* There has never been a guarantee that voters will approve the bonding issue. Don't guilt them into the grim choice that the HDC commissioners faced. Don't capitalize on how weary the public is of the whole thing. Give them an option that can inspire and let the community regroup.

A "Site Selection Analysis" will be posted soon at SaveOurBlock.org. It will deserve a close look. There is no reason to think that any of the owners whose properties are on it – other than 175 The Great Road – were ever contacted. There is no reason to assume that pursuing an alternative site now would require eminent domain. Or that the building process couldn't be dramatically expedited. There is no knowing what advertising for interest could yet reveal.

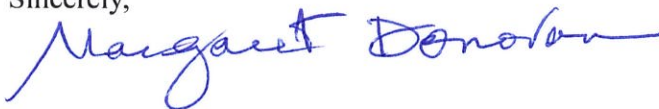
There may be better possibilities out there that are just waiting to be seen. For instance, the American Legion property is roughly the same shape as 139 The Great Road with more frontage and additional square feet possibly available behind the next-door building to the west. How conceivable is it that the current design could be adapted for that location if the Legion were willing to consider making 139 The Great Road its new home?

If the current station were turned into a substation, that comprehensive plan would not only solve the problem of the Northeast quadrant but would enhance service to the entire town – including South and West Bedford. There is a good possibility that the financials would be favorable, and the substation issue would not be looming in the future to cloud the outlook.

The BFD would finally have a great headquarters at the entrance to Bedford. And the bonus would be that 139 The Great Road could be remade into a showplace, with space for the American Legion and other civic groups to enjoy. Imagine that!

As Lt. Daly concluded on April 7th: "Bedford just needs to be better than this..."

Sincerely,



Margaret Donovan
SaveOurBlock.org

cc: The Bedford Select Board Members
Matthew J. Hanson, Town Manager

Finance Committee Members
Capital Expenditure Committee Members
Bedford Historic District Commissioners
Fire Chief James Bailey
Fire Captain Mark Sullivan
Fire Lt. Mark Daly
Fire Station Building Committee Members
Wayne Braverman, The Bedford Citizen