



Report of the Senior Study Committee for the 2009 Annual Town Meeting Submitted by the Board of Selectmen

March 2, 2009

In early 2007, the Board of Selectmen, in collaboration with the Council on Aging (COA) formed a Senior Study Committee to evaluate how the Town can best meet the evolving needs of Wellesley's seniors. During the past two years, the Study Committee has researched socioeconomic trends, met with gerontologists and other experts, surveyed Town residents, hosted a number of public forums, and visited senior centers in neighboring communities. This research has confirmed that the needs of Wellesley's seniors are similar to the needs of their peers in other communities. Specifically, Wellesley seniors are increasingly seeking opportunities to learn, socialize, exercise, and otherwise stay vital.

The Study Committee has also seen firsthand that the quality of a senior center facility impacts a town's ability to support its seniors. Successful senior centers are attractive, welcoming environments that flexibly support concurrent activities with minimal paid staff. Communities that have invested in a new or renovated center have invariably seen a significant increase in senior participation, including senior volunteers to support an expanded program.

The Town is the potential recipient of a gift of approximately \$800,000 from the trust of Mary Esther "Billie" Tolles, a former Wellesley resident. The gift is conditioned on the Town's use of the funds to construct a senior center. During 2007, the Study Committee explored the use of those funds to renovate the Wellesley Community Center, the present location of the COA. Ultimately, the Study Committee and officials of the Community Center concluded there was not a sufficient convergence of interests to support this approach. Following an evaluation of other potential sites, the Study Committee requested and received a \$50,000 appropriation at the 2008 Annual Town Meeting, half of which was paid by the Tolles Trust, to study the feasibility of constructing a new senior center on the former American Legion property at 496 Washington Street. Sterling Associates, an architectural firm that specializes in senior centers, was hired to perform the study.

The results of the feasibility study suggest the American Legion site would readily support a two-story facility of approximately 12,400 square feet. Such a structure would be fully compliant with the Town's zoning bylaws including footprint, building height and setback requirements. Sterling Associates has developed a preliminary design concept, which provides offices for the COA staff and visiting support professionals, the Town's Veterans officer, a drop-in area, a number of flexible spaces for various size activities and programs, a kitchen and a large hall that could be configured or subdivided for various uses. This preliminary design concept has been validated through review by the Study Committee and the COA Board, and at a number of public forums.

The parking needs of the proposed center would be met through a combination of on-street parking, 34 on-site spaces, and increased emphasis on car-pooling and use of senior transportation.

The use of other municipal parking facilities through a volunteer-based valet arrangement is also being explored.

The estimated cost based on the preliminary design concept is \$5.8 million. A portion of this cost would be offset by the anticipated gift, and the Town would fund the remainder of the cost with long-term debt. Based on current interest rates, the projected debt service cost for the project would increase the median annual tax bill by \$43. This amount would decline each year as the debt is repaid.

Residents over age 60 currently represent 21% of Wellesley's population and this percentage is projected to increase. The proposed FY10 operating budget for the COA, including related health insurance costs, is \$220,000, which represents 0.2% of the Town budget and equates to \$41 per Wellesley senior. Operation of the proposed senior center would necessitate one additional staff person (a custodian to maintain the facility and help with program setup and takedown) and the incremental annual operating cost (including the cost of the added staff person) is projected to be \$43,000.

At the upcoming 2009 Annual Town Meeting, the Selectmen will request an appropriation to the Permanent Building Committee (PBC) for funds sufficient to pay for the detailed design of a new senior center, based on the preliminary design. Representatives of the Study Committee are currently working with the PBC to determine the amount of that appropriation request and to further analyze the estimated cost of the total project. Following completion of the design documents during the summer of 2009, the Selectmen intend to return to a subsequent Town Meeting with bids in-hand to request an appropriation to fund the construction of the center.

While the appropriation to be requested at the upcoming Annual Town Meeting requires a simple majority vote, the subsequent appropriation for the cost of construction will require a 2/3rds majority. To avoid any apprehension regarding the Town's commitment to this project, the Selectmen have voluntarily agreed to subject the current appropriation request to a 2/3rds majority.

Conclusion

The Board of Selectmen unanimously supports this proposal. Despite these difficult economic times, the Selectmen are persuaded by the merits of this investment toward meeting the growing needs of our seniors. An improved facility would result in greater participation in COA programs and make a positive difference in the lives of many current and future residents. The Town spends less on its seniors than surrounding communities and the COA has never been the recipient of any capital funds. While \$5 million is a significant cost, amortized over 20 years it will initially have a modest impact on property taxes and that impact will decline each year. The Selectmen also believe the current economic climate is likely to result in favorable construction bids, which should result in a lower project cost.

Additional information regarding the work of the Senior Study Committee and the Feasibility Study is available on the Town website (www.wellesleyma.gov).

Gregory B. Mills, Chair

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