

REPORT OF THE TOLLES-PARSONS REVIEW COMMITTEE

Introduction

The Council on Aging (COA) currently operates its senior program in leased space at the Wellesley Community Center. It offers a lunch program and provides support services and programming as space and staff permit. Based on 2011 data, 5 residents on average participate in the lunch program every day, and 65 residents come to the center each day for services or programs.

Several years ago, the COA proposed the construction of a stand-alone senior center at the former American Legion site to provide dedicated space for its programming and services. There have been criticisms of this proposal, including 1) there is a declining need for COA services since the number of seniors in Town is shrinking, 2) the construction is unnecessary due to the a low demand for the COA services, which do not align with the needs or interests of most Wellesley seniors, 3) there are underutilized municipal spaces and resources that could house the COA and its activities, and 4) the American Legion site is too small and doesn't have enough parking.

In response to these concerns, the COA rethought its model and developed a new proposal, originally referred to as the "hub and spokes" model, and more recently named the Collaborative Model. Its focus is to collaborate and coordinate with other Town departments to supplement programming and resources housed at the center. The Board of Selectmen appointed a group of eight citizens to review and evaluate this model.

Charge of the Committee

1. Evaluate the "hub and spokes" paradigm, and its focus on collaborating with other Town departments;
2. Review the programming and space requirements necessary to realize the vision;
3. Evaluate the offerings and resources of other Town departments which could be coordinated with the offerings of the Tolles-Parsons Center; and
4. Assess the 496 Washington Street site as a central hub for the activities of the Council on Aging.

Composition of the Committee

The committee members were selected because of their knowledge of the community and/or their interest and knowledge of aging issues. Members range in age from their 40s to their 70s to insure that the views of both current and future seniors were represented. The committee members had not been previously involved in the planning of the senior center project and bring a fresh perspective to the discussion. The members and their backgrounds are listed at the end of this Report in Appendix I.

A summary of the activities of the committee is found at Appendix II.

Threshold Question: Does Wellesley Need a Stand Alone Center?

From the outset, the committee thought it was important to consider the stated opposition of citizens who think a stand-alone center is unnecessary.

Is the Number of Seniors in Wellesley Shrinking?

The 2010 US census counted 5,429 residents in Wellesley aged 60 or older. This represents 19.4% of the total population of the Town. In 2000, the US census counted 4,780 residents aged 60 or older, which was then 17.9% of the Town. Thus, over the last 10 years, the number of people living in Wellesley over the age of 60 has grown, both in terms of actual numbers and as a percentage of the population. To give some context to these figures, the number of children receiving services from the Wellesley public schools as of October 1, 2012 was 5,032.

All national demographic projections reviewed by the committee predict a significant increase in the number of people aged 60 and older for the next 30 years. We assume Wellesley's population will follow national trends.

Are Senior Centers Outdated?

When senior centers were built in the 1960s, they primarily served as social service agencies, focusing on the needs of low income and frail elderly. Fifty years later, there is still a need to support vulnerable seniors. But there are many other seniors who do not need traditional social services, and will not access a center that is seen as primarily designed for those in need. These seniors are, and seek to remain, socially and physically active, intellectually curious, and involved with their communities. An attractive center designed with the needs of seniors in mind would give them opportunities to socialize, exercise and to pursue both old and new interests.

There are ample examples of senior centers who are addressing the needs of active seniors. These centers have rethought their assumptions, their programming and their physical space to meet the needs of independent seniors, while continuing to support their most vulnerable citizens. In short, they have created a new paradigm, offering a broader array of physical, recreational and educational programming, which involve the seniors in the design, planning and implementation of the programs. The new proposal by the COA represents recognition of this paradigm shift.

If It Is Built, Will They Come?

The committee considered the pros and cons of recommending another survey of Wellesley seniors' interest in a new center. However, the committee decided against it after speaking with an expert in survey research. He explained that a survey sent out to all citizens in a town will not accurately forecast demand, especially for innovative services. The people who respond are likely to hold strong views on either end of the spectrum. Unless there is a carefully designed sample selected to poll, and carefully designed questions that remove bias, a survey is not a good planning tool. Such a survey would cost thousands of dollars, and in the view of the committee, would first require an education program to inform residents about the COA's proposed model.

The expert suggested that for the Town's purposes, the committee could get an indication of the community's likely response by measuring the response of other communities to their new senior centers, and Wellesley's response to its other new facilities. The committee identified the following patterns that seem to be predictive indicators of Wellesley's likely response:

1. The four senior centers we visited which had been built within the last 5 years each experienced a **tripling** in average attendance after the new building was opened. The committee had telephone conversations with six other new senior centers, which reported similar increases.
2. Wellesley has experienced a sustained upswing in use when it has built a new building to house an activity in the last 10 years: the Library, the Warren Recreation Building, and the PAWS pre-school building.

3. The programming that the COA has recently done that is representative of the type of programming it would like to offer regularly has been extremely popular and has attracted numbers far in excess of its average number of participants. Examples are the lecture series co-sponsored by the COA and the Library (85 attendees), the golfing tournament at Nehoiden (34 participants), the upcoming seminar series offered by Alan Schechter, retired professor at Wellesley College (the 30 spaces filled quickly, with a waiting list of 33).
4. When we visited the new Natick Senior Center, we saw several Wellesley residents participating in programs – people who do not attend Wellesley’s senior center.

Are There Other Municipal Sites that Could be Used?

The Warren Building is not a viable alternative for the Senior Center. Although the building looks large from the outside, there are not that many program spaces inside. There are some rooms open during portions of the day, but the building is fully utilized by children’s camps throughout the summer. There is no room for the administrative offices of the COA. Parking restrictions imposed on Warren severely limit the number of cars that can be on site at any given time. The building layout and parking limitations at Warren do not allow for a gathering area for seniors, a key component of most centers.

The Community Center, which has housed the senior center for many years, was designed for civic groups who needed a place to meet. Its shortcomings as a senior center have been reviewed and acknowledged by the Selectmen, who fully explored the possibility of remodeling that space with the Wellesley Community Center in 2011. At that time, the Selectmen concluded that the Town would not finance the costs of the needed renovations at the WCC without ownership or control of the building.

Does the Washington Street Site Work as the Site for the Hub?

The site at 496 Washington Street is compact but viable. Assuming a building footprint of 6,000 sq. feet, there is parking on site for 34 cars, including 2 handicapped spaces. There is parking on Washington Street for 41 cars. There are plans to expand the parking on land abutting the police station parking lot, which will yield another 20 spaces, for a total of 85 spaces.

There are concerns that there is not enough on-site parking under this configuration, and that parking on Washington Street and across the street is too dangerous. There are also concerns that the traffic on Washington Street will be chaotic when there is a funeral at St. Paul’s and on early release days from the St. Paul’s School.

The committee visited several senior centers that had limited or no on-site parking, and the centers still worked well. As a general matter, the committee observes that the Town has a traffic and parking challenge even without a senior center, and the only way to address these issues is to alter behavior by carpooling, walking, or developing a transportation system that will allow people to access town center without using their cars. The committee also thinks that no site should be required to meet the demands of infrequent events, such as large funerals.

The committee has developed a number of suggestions to help improve the parking and traffic:

- Reconfigure the parking spaces on Washington Street by making the parking spaces deeper, so that when a driver opens the street side door, the door does not swing out into the traffic lane. It would require moving the sidewalk on Washington Street, but it would be a significant improvement to Washington Street.

- Install a pedestrian cross walk and light close to the expanded police station parking lot, with a timer adjusted to the needs of senior citizens.
- Use the COA van to pick up and deliver seniors to the site.
- Explore the possibility of using the specialized vans used to transport special needs students to Sprague to transport seniors with mobility problems during school hours.
- Develop a sticker system for cars so that seniors with mobility issues would be given a priority right to park on site, not on the street.
- Use the sticker system to give seniors an exclusive right to use some of the spaces on Washington Street between the hours of 9 and 4.
- Work with St. Paul's to design a pick up system for early release days that minimizes the disruption on Washington Street. This could include a mutual determination of the safest pick up point and/or giving parents an exclusive right to park on Washington Street during the pick-up time.
- Work with St. Paul's so that a system is devised to notify the COA of funerals occurring during the hours of programming so that Washington Street spaces would be cleared for funeral use.

We think that there are a number of very positive aspects with the Washington Street site. First, it is close to the town center and most people will already go near the site as they run their general errands in town. Second, it overlooks a lovely park. Third, St. Paul's would gain access to an additional 54 off street parking spaces on weekends and holidays when the center is not in use. Older parishioners who attend morning mass could easily take advantage of the morning coffee, socializing and programming at the center which could be scheduled to accommodate those attending mass.

The Proposed Collaborative Model

The Collaborative Model envisions that the new building will serve as the central location for COA administration, supportive services and socialization. It will have a kitchen and dining space for the lunch program, and program rooms with flexible layouts to permit a range of activities. One of the most important features of the new building will be a dedicated and attractive area where people can meet, have tea or coffee, and visit with each other throughout the day. This gathering area is seen as key to developing and maintaining a sense of community among the participants in the programming.

The programming offered on site will be supplemented and enhanced by programming collaborations with other Town departments. Although there is already some collaboration, the committee thinks that ongoing communication and coordination among the various departments will yield a wider range of programs for all ages. This type of collaboration will require active oversight by the Board of Selectmen, which should consider appointing some members to the COA with the expectation that they will serve as liaisons to these other departments. Residents who have previously served on the boards of these town committees would be especially effective.

Currently there is duplication in programming offered by the Recreation Department, the Library and the COA. Duplicated programs could be eliminated, new offerings could be developed,

oversubscribed programs could be expanded, and a master calendar of all offerings could and should be developed. The collaboration goes beyond finding rooms in buildings; it should review the talents and resources of each department and make sure they are fully utilized, whether in a classroom, a field trip, or during outdoor activities.

Building sites

Sites that are most likely to be part of the collaboration are:

- The Library
 - The computer room for computer training
 - The Wakelin Room for large concerts and lectures

- The Warren Building
 - The gym and dance studio for vigorous exercise programs and indoor walking
 - The art and ceramics rooms for painting and ceramics
 - The Wellesley Community Center for larger lectures and dining events
 - The Wellesley High School for its cafeteria and auditorium

Programming transferred to the Center

As part of the Collaborative Model, some programming and services currently offered elsewhere could be moved to the new senior center, consolidating core services on site and providing exposure of the offerings of other departments to the seniors. These programs include:

- Wellness Clinics offered by the Board of Health
- Some book groups run by the Library staff
- Duplicate bridge and bridge lessons that are oversubscribed at Warren
- Exercise classes designed for the needs of older individuals
- Introductory classes offered by other departments that would subsequently continue off site at the Warren Building or at the Library

Wellesley at Home

The Senior Center could also serve as a resource for the newly formed non-profit, Wellesley at Home, Inc. This is a group of Town residents who have formed an organization to support them in their desire to age in place, and is part of a national movement to organize support and social activities for seniors who want to age in place. Currently Wellesley at Home offers social opportunities and referrals for other services for its members. Its leadership has expressed its enthusiasm for working with the COA to develop programs responsive to the interests of its membership.

Other Programming Resources

In addition to using the physical spaces operated by other Town departments, the Committee sees great potential in programming that takes advantage of other Town resources and human assets. These programs could include

- Outdoor programming through the Recreation Department or the Natural Resources Committee, such as walks, orienteering, surveying plants and trees

- Volunteer opportunities for students: computer trouble shooting, yard clean ups, intergenerational bands

- Volunteer opportunities for seniors: tutoring, advising about career options, mentoring those with entrepreneurial aspirations

This model represents more than a plan to make efficient use of available space. It reflects an intention to provide an expanded roster of offerings that could never all be given in the 12,000 square foot building proposed for Washington Street. It will give intergenerational opportunities to seniors who seek them, reduce traffic and parking issues on Washington Street, and allow the main building to function primarily as a place of social engagement and core programming specific to seniors. It will allow the COA to continue to develop new programs to satisfy the evolving interests of a much broader group of elders. It would provide an expanded frame of reference for all Town departments.

Required Physical Space

The planning for the senior center is still in an early phase. After reviewing the schematic drawings, the committee has concluded that the proposed building will support the core activities of the COA and will not overbuild or duplicate other resources in Town. In terms of refining the schematic design, the committee encourages the COA to remain focused on the following elements:

- A comfortable designated space for people to relax and visit that is not part of the main foyer
- Adequate office space for staff and counseling
- A kitchen that is sized appropriately for the anticipated dining program
- Flexible activity spaces that do not duplicate specialized facilities located in other municipal buildings
- A bright and airy environment

Summary

The need for community resources for seniors has not disappeared, and will only increase in the next two decades. The social phenomenon of having a large cohort of aging people is new, and will require new kinds of community support. It is clear that seniors will have to take charge of their futures. But the community has to provide some support. Just as the baby boomers required towns to build additional schools and playing fields in the 1950s, these boomers will require additional resources to enable them to remain healthy and active members of the community.

The COA has developed a paradigm that would provide these resources to a broad cross-section of seniors. The potential for collaborative programming is evident, and the building schematics align with the programming concepts. Other communities have successfully implemented similar models. We encourage the Board of Selectmen to move forward with the construction of a new senior center without further delay.

Respectfully submitted,

The Tolles Parsons Review Committee

Heather Sawitsky, Chair

Jean Boyle

Tim Driver

David Himmelberger

Todd Himstead

Dona Kemp

Phil Laughlin

Kathleen Woodward

Appendix I

Members of the Senior Center Review Committee

Heather Sawitsky, Chair, has been general counsel to a retirement community for 15 years. She has a Masters in Public Health and is focused on developing innovative support and long-term care options for seniors. She was the Town Moderator for 7 years and is currently a Town Meeting Member.

Jean Boyle is the vice president of Wellesley at Home, Inc., a nonprofit dedicated to supporting seniors who wish to age in place by developing a range of programs and contacts for services. Jean has lived in Wellesley for 20 years, participating in many COA offerings. Her background is in marketing and communications.

Tim Driver is CEO of RetirementJobs.com, a career website for people over the age of 50. Its brand and advocacy, helping older Americans more easily engage with their communities, have been recognized in the private and public sectors, including the US Senate and White House. Tim has been a resident of Wellesley for 11 years. He and his wife Lisa, a teacher at the Upham School, have 3 children in the Wellesley schools. Tim also serves on the Wellesley Library Foundation Board and the Wellesley Baseball Board.

David Himmelberger is a near lifelong resident of the Town, who has previously served on the Advisory Committee and Board of Selectmen. He is currently serving as a Town Meeting Member and he and his wife Katy have two girls in the Wellesley school system. David is an attorney with a solo practice in Wellesley.

Todd Himstead is a father of two WPS students who has lived in Wellesley for 16 years. He has been a Town Meeting Member since 2006, a member of the Sprague Field Task Force, and engaged in diverse neighborhood and school efforts for over a decade.

Dona Kemp has been a Town Meeting Member for 25 years, a director on the board of the Wellesley Housing Development Corporation since the board was formed in 2000, and a former member of the Advisory Committee and the Community Preservation Committee. Dona has also served as the President of the Massachusetts League of Women Voters.

Phil Laughlin has been a Town Meeting Member for 10 years. He served as the Vice Chair of the Human Resources Board; Vice Chair of the Advisory Committee; and was a member of the Ad Hoc Facilities Maintenance Committee.

Kathleen Woodward has been a Town Meeting Member for 14 years. She has two children in the public schools and for many years has been active in school budget issues at the grassroots level. Kathleen is a practicing environmental attorney.

Appendix II

Overview of the Committee's Work

The committee has met weekly for the last two months. At those meetings, it has received input from the following groups:

- The Tolles-Parsons Planning Group
- The Council on Aging,
- Architect Bill Sterling, who developed the schematic design for the new center
- Citizens who had expressed concerns about the construction of a new center
- Representatives of the Library, Recreation and Health Departments

The committee visited the existing site of the Senior Center at the WCC, the proposed site on Washington Street, and the Warren Building. It also toured senior centers in the following towns:

- Belmont Senior Center
- Hopkinton Senior Center
- Malden Senior Center
- Natick Senior Center
- Needham Senior Center

The committee did additional research, reviewing population data, provisions of the Older Americans Act and the Nutrition Services Program, and the work of the National Institute of Senior Centers (NISC), its accreditations standards, and its most recent position paper on the future of senior centers. Members reviewed the programming and building designs of other senior centers that the NISC cited for their innovation and best practices. It reviewed the written comments of citizens who had expressed their concerns about a new center to the Board of Selectmen. Last, but not least, it conducted telephone interviews with representatives of the following senior centers to learn more about their most successful programming, benefits of a new building, cross programming initiatives with other groups, and increases in utilization:

- Agawam
- Duxbury
- Franklin
- Marshfield
- Mashpee
- Northboro