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The eyesore in town center

Municipal offices often decaying

The Boston Globe



The Dracut Town Hall Annex, built in the 1800s, is not handicapped accessible. (Joanne Rathe/ Globe Staff)

By Kathleen Burge
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TOPSFIELD - Beneath the soaring tin ceiling of Topsfield's Great Hall, where brass bands once played and townspeople danced into the early morning, now lies a gray labyrinth of office cubicles.

At the back of the room, in this town hall built in 1873, a thick silver tube snakes from a window to a portable air conditioner, across a wooden floor that was once a stage. The balcony is packed with an army of metal walkers belonging to the town's Council on Aging, rolled up copies of old town plans, and metal filing cabinets.

"When you see the basement, you'll see why we store things up here," said Town Administrator Virginia Wilder. She headed down two flights of stairs, into the musty fieldstone cellar, home to puddles of water.

Across the state, town halls, many of them more than 100 years old, are fading and badly in need of millions of dollars in repairs.

The heating system in Hull's Town Hall regularly fails, and workers are squeezed into small spaces. Malden, which built its City Hall during the 1970s craze for pedestrian malls, wants to tear down its building. Needham plans a top-to-bottom rehabilitation to modernize its 1904-era Town Hall, make it more accessible for the disabled, restore the interior, build an addition, and even repair a cupola that was once painted with gold leaf.

These aging town halls, the buildings where the people meet their government, lie on the last frontier of public works projects. State and federal money for rehabilitation projects is scarce, especially when roads and schools are competing for money in dire economic times. Dozens of communities across Massachusetts have applied for federal stimulus money for town hall renovations, but they have been disappointed.

"The facilities are very important, but what happens frequently, of course, is there are competing demands on the capital side," said Geoffrey Beckwith,

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executive director of the Massachusetts Municipal Association. “Frequently, communities have put the town hall and city hall renovation on the back burner. But after a while, it becomes too expensive to wait any longer.”

In Westford, the Town Hall has stood empty for more than a year, after officials discovered that the old building’s beams were cracked. Town workers were dispersed to remote locations.

In Bridgewater, where the paint is peeling from the Town Hall, municipal offices are spread through three buildings. In Dracut, despite a court order to make town offices handicapped accessible, residents voted down expensive renovation plans. In Lowell, snow drifts in through the drafty windows in City Hall.

And in Hull, the Town Hall is in such bad shape that officials asked for \$14.5 million in federal stimulus money to completely renovate and expand it.

The building is too small and cannot house all the town’s offices, said Town Manager Philip E. Lemnios. The windows need to be replaced, and the cupola leaks. “It has a myriad of structural issues,” Lemnios said.

A few years ago, Mayor Richard C. Howard of Malden proposed tearing down Malden Government Center, which blocks Pleasant Street and was conceived in the 1970s as an anchor to a pedestrian mall. But the street remains open to traffic, blocked at one end by the looming brick building, which is also called City Hall.

Howard’s proposal stalled on finances, but city officials still hope to move its municipal building and don’t want to pour money into the current headquarters. Now the aging carpet is loose and taped down, so that visitors do not trip. The elevators often break down.

Gloucester’s City Hall was declared structurally unsafe in 2004, and workers were evacuated for about a year until repairs could be made. The building was briefly evacuated again in 2007, when a rotten beam was discovered. The city has continued to repair the building, even asking residents for donations.

In Topsfield, where the second-floor offices are not handicapped accessible, officials estimate that it would cost \$3 million to renovate and expand the Town Hall.

“It is in dire need of renovation,” Wilder said. “It’s something the town has looked at, but it’s something the town obviously can’t afford at this point.”

Needham, meanwhile, plans an \$18 million renovation starting next year.

“A lot of these towns, they’ve got an old building that’s expensive to maintain,” said Doug Manley, architect at McGinley, Kalsow & Associates, a Somerville firm that is handling the Needham project and others in Provincetown and Sandwich. “Towns, with their tight budgets, are looking to save energy.”

Many town officials in Westford are now working from portable buildings behind the town’s elementary school, and renovations on the old Town Hall may begin this fall. Earlier this year, Westford voters approved spending \$4 million to gut the building and renovate. Until work is completed, municipal offices will remain scattered around town.

“People have to drive to see the other departments or turn in their bills and their payroll,” said Town Manager Jodi Ross. “It’s definitely not an efficient way to operate.”

At Bridgewater’s Town Hall, built in 1843, paint is peeling off the Corinthian columns, a metal railing flanking the main door lists to the left, and a window pane above the entry is held together by a V-shaped strip of duct tape. Inside, the upper level is no longer used because it is not handicapped accessible. On the first floor, a leaky basement causes a powerful musty smell to waft through on damp days.

“It’s not very healthy for the employees,” said Town Clerk Ronald R. Adams, who secured a humidifier after workers complained.

Adams, who calls the condition of the building deplorable, pointed to the women’s bathroom, where an “out of order” sign hangs.

“They haven’t done any work on this building in 20 years,” he said. Inside, the floor is torn up.

Across the square sits the neoclassical Academy Building, which began as a private school 100 years ago and now houses the town’s Health and Inspectional Services departments. Building Inspector David Moore is frustrated with the building’s lack of accessibility for the handicapped. A note posted at the Academy Building’s entry instructs those unable to take the stairs to the basement meeting room to pick up the handicapped lift key, across the street at the fire station.

While a ramp leads to the first-floor side entrance, Moore said, a wheelchair user would be hard-pressed to navigate through the door frame. And people looking to speak to anyone at the Inspectional Services Department, but unable to make the climb upstairs, must ask a staff member to come down to the main lobby.

“The town is very fortunate complaints haven’t been brought to the state, but the public suffers because our buildings are not accessible,” Moore said.

In Lakeville, the Town Hall is in a century-old building that started out as a pumping station in 1894, channeling 5 million gallons of water an hour from Assawampsett Pond to Taunton. The city constructed a more modern plant in 1952 and turned its obsolete building over to Lakeville for \$7,000.

The municipal offices and the Police Department initially shared the old pumping station, and a fire station was soon attached. When space grew tight in the 1970s, the police moved down the street to another recycled building, the former Silver Fox Restaurant, where they remain. The recycled buildings are not handicapped accessible.

“If someone needs to talk to the clerk or treasurer, they just come in to the selectmen’s office, and we call the office workers to come down,” said Town Administrator Rita Garbitt. The selectmen’s office, Board of Health, and Fire Department are the only areas in the complex with street-level access.

One day last week, , Walter Moquin was cautiously working his way up the Town Hall’s granite steps, as he does twice a year to pay his real estate taxes. But the 81-year-old, driving a car with a handicapped placard, was not clamoring for renovations.

“This building is adequate,” Moquin said. “To go up on taxes for a new building isn’t justified. It’s too much of a burden.”

Globe correspondents Christine Legere, Matt Rocheleau, and Brian Benson contributed to this report. Kathleen Burge can be reached at kburge@globe.com. ■

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