Swanzey selectmen OK plan to build new fire station

By Meghan Foley Sentinel Staff
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SWANZEY CENTER — Building a new central fire station will be the selectmen's first priority in the coming months, as the board seeks to address overcrowding and safety issues in five of the town's facilities.

During a meeting Monday morning, board members agreed to forge ahead with a proposal for a new, 17,660-square-foot station, with the goal of getting the project on the town meeting warrant in March.

The new building, which would be on donated land on Safford Drive, is estimated to cost about $4.5 million, according to information from Ingram Construction Corp. of West Swanzey.

The estimate was included in a recently released report about Swanzey's combined town hall and fire station on Old Homestead Highway (Route 32), the police station on Eaton Road, and the public works facility and transfer station, both on Pine Street. Keene architect Daniel V. Scully wrote the report after town officials hired him last year to study the town-owned buildings and offer recommendations for them.

All five facilities at the very least need to be upgraded, and at the most need to be replaced, according to the report.

Scully's hiring followed re-establishment of the town's capital improvement program committee earlier in 2013, which the selectmen tasked with looking at the future of town facilities.

Selectmen Chairman Kenneth P. Colby Jr. said in a phone interview this morning that board members have agreed to address the central fire station first because it needs to come out of the basement of town hall and have its own structure.

"It's a safety issue as far as town hall goes. There are no fire barriers between the station and town hall, and the fumes from the trucks can get into the office space," he said.

Swanzey Town Hall opened in 1914, and the fire station was added later.

Colby said the selectmen's thinking in getting the fire station out of town hall is to free up the space for whatever the next step will be to address Swanzey's facilities shortfalls.

He expects once the fire station is dealt with, town officials will focus on town hall, which has its own problems, he said.

Excluding the fire station, town hall has several building code and structural issues, including roof

trusses that will require repair or replacement. Two different engineers have deemed the roof unsafe, according to Scully's report.

The building is also not handicapped accessible, is cramped, and its trim, clapboards and windows sills are rotted and in need of repair, according to the report.

Monday's meeting about the fire station was a cross between an information and strategy session, with board members getting an overview of the proposed project from Robert Mitchell of Mitchell Associates Architects. The Voorheesville, N.Y., firm specializes in the construction of fire stations.

Board members also discussed how to go about marketing the project to voters.

"The whole crux of the matter this morning is to point toward a bond hearing in January," Colby said. "We need to come up with a schedule and list of what we need to do, what has been accomplished, what can be accomplished, and what needs to be done between now and then."

Swanzey has two outlying fire stations, one on the east side of town and the other on the west side. Town officials plan to keep those stations in place and operating.

The idea of building a new central fire station in town has been considered since at least 1988 when voters at town meeting established the Future Fire Station Capital Reserve Fund. In 2002, town meeting voters named the selectmen as the agent for expenditures from the fund.

The fund's balance at the end of this year is estimated to be $389,372, Town Administrator Shane P. O'Keefe said Monday.

In addition, Swanzey's master plan, which was last updated in 2003, recommends the town build a new central fire station, calling it a high priority.

It also said all town facilities, with the exception of the then two-year-old police station, needed to be updated or replaced.

Selectman W. William Hutwelker 3rd said Monday the board faces significant challenges making a case for a new fire station, including projections that the region's population will remain flat or decline over the next five to 10 years.

To overcome these challenges, town officials must make the argument that the status quo can't continue with the central fire station, and that the larger facility is needed to meet regulations and increases in call volume for the department, Hutwelker said.

Fire Chief Norman W. Skantze said his department responded to 864 calls last year, and is on track to exceed that number this year.

Over the years, Swanzey town government has tried to be as frugal as possible, but now is the time for the town to consider what it needs updating, Colby said this morning.

Bond rates are low, and the town has the land for a new central fire station following a donation by local property owner John G. Burk last month, he said.

In accordance with state law, public hearings will be held Dec. 9 and 23 about the town accepting the property donation. The selectmen will have the final decision whether the town accepts the land.

Voters will have the final say as to whether the proposed project becomes a reality.

Selectmen discussed having the bond hearing for the project on Jan. 13, and are expected to finalize that date at its meeting at 6 p.m. today.