

8 Feb 96

Location focus of court bond hearing

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JAFFREY — The big question residents had for selectmen at a public hearing Monday on a proposed \$1 million bond to build a new district court house is not so much why, but where.

Close to downtown Jaffrey would be good, some supporters said. But they also said they wouldn't support building a court house on the Jaffrey/Peterborough town line.

Jaffrey and Peterborough officials have recently discussed a joint effort to build a court near the line.

Selectmen will ask Town Meeting voters to approve a bond appropriation of up to \$1 million to either purchase land and construct a courthouse or purchase property with an existing building and make necessary modifications to create a courthouse for the Jaffrey-Peterborough District Court.

The warrant article also gives selectmen the authority to enter into an agreement with the state

for the use of the building. The terms of the agreement will allow the town to recover all expenses pertaining to the bond and the operation of the building for as long as the town owns the property, the article states.

The town hopes to build the courthouse and lease it to the state in a 20-year agreement that will pay back the bond, interest and operating costs and leave the property in the hands of the state. The idea is not to become a permanent landlord, but to keep the court in Jaffrey.

Among the incentives for retaining the court are police costs, especially overtime, the draw for local businesses and the prestige of having the court in Jaffrey.

Peterborough officials have already been authorized by voters to raise a \$1 million bond to construct a courthouse in that town. In a meeting last summer state and local officials urged Jaffrey selectmen to do the same thing to level the playing field in an effort to retain the court.

Monday, State Representative

"I don't see how a court on the border of Peterborough benefits Jaffrey."

**Robert Stephenson,
Jaffrey**

H. Charles Royce said the state prefers a lease arrangement and prefers to have a town or private party build the court.

Town Manager Jon Sistare said the state is looking for a building of approximately 10,000 square feet for a jury-capable district courthouse.

Selectman Maureen Desmarais said she had spoken with state court officials who told her the state would never pull a court out of a town that owns a courthouse, leaving the town with an unpaid bond. It "never has happened and never will," she said.

That makes the cost a "total wash except property is taken off the tax rolls," said resident Robert Stephenson.

What bothered Stephenson and some of the handful of residents attending the public hearing, however, was a lack of specifics. There are no architectural drawings, for instance. And no location under consideration.

Stephenson said he supports a court in Jaffrey because it is good for local businesses, among other benefits. "But I don't see how a court on the border of Peterbor-

ough benefits Jaffrey," he said. Stephenson said he would rather see the court in downtown Peterborough than on the border of the two towns.

He also said the lack of any public input after the bond is approved is an important issue. Resident Joanne Stefanski said the bond approval doesn't leave the voters any say about the location.

"We can't say I don't like it, after the bond is approved," she said. "And we don't know where it's going. I don't want to pay for a building in Peterborough."

When Desmarais said the courthouse would have to be "absolutely

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acceptable for the area," Stefanski protested.

"You don't have a plan," she said.

Selectman Chairman David Belletete said the town would likely convene a committee to look into building specifications, search for a location and do cost estimates.

Former selectman Jeanne LaBrie said the bond is necessary to "keep us in the ballgame." She

said the court would end up in Peterborough without a town effort.

Both LaBrie and Royce said they were in favor of keeping the court close to the center of town and opposed to locating the court near the Peterborough town line.

LaBrie said the town has to have faith in the officials they elect to represent the best interests of the town in the negotiations with the state and location of the court. But resident Gillian Whalen said the selectmen were asking the voters

to give up their Town Meeting power to purchase real estate to the selectmen.

"It's not a matter of trusting the selectmen, but giving up our power," she said. "I feel we have to trust Town Meeting."

Belletete said he felt a public presentation after the details are worked out was a good idea, but if the selectmen made that a binding condition of the bond it would "muddy" the negotiations with the state.