

Piece for Ledger re Town Office/Community Center

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I wrote an article some months ago chronicling the ‘Seats of Jaffrey Government.’ In the past 150 years, the setting where public business was carried on has been all over the place: the Meetinghouse early on, then the second floor of the present Library, then what’s now the Police Station (the only purpose-built Town Office in Jaffrey’s history), then on to where it is now. When I arrived in Jaffrey, in 1977, the present Police Station—then Town Office—accommodated everything: nearly all the functions of the Town, the Police Department (down in the basement), the District Court, and the Meeting Room (used by all the Town boards and by the Court). The population then was about 4,350.

The population now is about 5,700, not a great deal more. But now we have the Police Station (former Town Office), the Town Office (former lumber warehouse/bank building), a new Courthouse, and the Water Works. These are four separate buildings that accommodate what was in 1977 contained in a single building.

Well, there are reasons for this, and legitimate ones. We now have a Town Manager form of government which we didn’t have in 1977. This means space is needed for more people. Policing has changed: more officers are called for. Activity at the Court increases: more space is required. And local government is more complex than years ago. There are just too many things that need doing, and that need expertise to do. Three part-time selectmen can’t do it and shouldn’t be expected to do it.

So despite an increase of population from 4,350 to 5,700—just over 30% over 30 years—the space needed for the conduct of

public business has increased by say, 100%, perhaps a bit more or perhaps a bit less.

Yes, Jaffrey needs a new Town Office, or at least it needs better space than it has now and it needs somewhat more than it needs now.

But I don't believe it should be combined with any other use. (Although that's largely what happened in the past: town offices shared space with the new Conant High School in the Meetinghouse after the Civic War. The town office then moved to the second floor of the then new Clay Library when it opened in 1896.) The next move was in 1955 when the new Town Office (now Police Station) opened its doors. But that wasn't a spur-of-the-moment decision. A Town Hall Committee was formed way back in 1927 but it wasn't until 1953 that Town Meeting approved the new building. That's a whole generation.

I expect we'll have a new Town Office but it's unlikely to happen a year or so after first being seriously proposed. Remember the Library addition? That was approved on its third try. And how can we forget the back-and-forth over several years over a new or renovated high school?

I'm an advocate for a new Town Office. But I would prefer one unassociated with other uses. It should be an attractive building, one to be proud of; one that's built well and is efficient to operate and maintain and that will well serve the needs of the town for years to come. Do what's necessary to keep the existing Town Office running for the next few years and in the meantime plan well for a replacement facility. It should be in a prime location. That, I believe, should either be on the Goodnow Street side of the overall site (with the present building coming down for replacement parking and the bank drive-thru relocated). Or how about this? Renovate and expand to the north the Police Station

and return the building to its former use. The Police Department could still be accommodated on the lower level, or relocated. Or how about a conversation with TD Bank? Perhaps it would jump at the chance to downsize to another Jaffrey location. What a Town Office that building could make!