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**NEWS**

# The home for a host of history: After over a hundred years of use, Franklin's venerable facility could take on a new role

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FRANKLIN -- It was 1891 and the School Committee, after building two new schools in previous years, still needed more classrooms for its 1,000 students.

Students at the first high school, built in 1865, had to hold classes in the girls' cloakroom. The Town Hall, where grammar school students had been taught for three years, was in poor condition, the committee told residents.

"Within a year, two of the teachers who have taught there have been obliged to give up on account of ill health, which seemed to be fairly attributable and the injurious influence of this house," the committee wrote in Franklin's Jan. 31, 1891, Town Report.

After years of pleading and warnings the town could face state fines, the School Committee prevailed. In 1893, Horace Mann High School went up across the street from old Town Hall, with purchase of the land and construction costing \$34,000.

The 110 years since has seen much of the town's history there, with another school for fifth- and- sixth-graders and the current Franklin Municipal Building.

But Franklin now has more than 30,000 residents and officials say it's time to leave 150 Emmons St. for new quarters a mile away.

Rather than sell or move new town offices there, Franklin hopes to use the municipal building in a new way: as landlord.

"From a developer's standpoint, it has traffic and that's certainly what commercial developers want," said Town Administrator Jeff Nutting. "Clearly, there is an asset here that the town has and we can tap into that asset to bring in revenue for taxpayers."

## Old Town Hall

Once part of Wrentham, Franklin became a town in 1778. Despite initial plans to incorporate as Exeter, residents named the community for Benjamin Franklin, hoping he would give the town a bell in return.

But with "sense being preferable to sound," Franklin gave the town 116 books instead, laying the foundation for the nation's first public lending library.

Town operations took longer. Franklin had no municipal headquarters until 1842, when sawmill owner Erastus Metcalf built the old Town Hall on land donated by fellow businessman Alexander DeWitt, said Barbara Smith, chairwoman of the Franklin Historical Commission.

From 1888 to 1891, grammar school students were moved there for lack of other space, according to town reports.

"They could not crowd 75 or 80 pupils in a room large enough for only 50," the School Committee wrote in the Jan. 31, 1889, Town Report.

In the early 1900s, the 80 West Central St. building was used largely for celebrations and gatherings.

Selectmen met through the 1930s on the second floor of "Bank Block," a large brick structure along Depot Street that housed First National Bank, Dean Co-operative Bank and Benjamin Franklin Savings Bank, according to Smith.

Other town offices remained outside for longer. When attorney George Dana served as town clerk from 1942 to 1971, he performed his duties from his law office above the present-day Reunions restaurant, Smith said.

By 1978, most of Franklin's offices had moved to old Town Hall. The building soon proved too small for the needs of the town's 18,000 residents, especially for public hearings, said Albert Brunelli, a selectman from 1970 to 1978.

"There wasn't enough meeting space," said Brunelli, also Franklin's treasurer-collector from 1980 to 1992.

Residents agreed. That April, Town Meeting approved a new charter creating a town council-town administrator government along with a \$698,000 plan to remodel the Horace Mann

School across the street, adding the wing that now holds the town clerk's office.

## **New Municipal Center**

After years of building new schools, the Town Council adopted a 20/20 capital program two years ago to help plan for Franklin's other needs. On the top of that list: a new municipal center.

The town has moved toward this with its \$3 million purchase of the Pastorello Building at 355 East Central St. A \$2.2 million overhaul, begun in September, is slated for completion next June.

Plans call for the town clerk, assessor and treasurer-collector to work on the first floor, sharing a vault and a drive-through window for residents to drop off payments. Building and planning offices will be nearby.

On the second floor, the Town Council will meet in a room that can hold 90 people, nearly double the occupancy of the current meeting space. The town and school business and technology offices will sit across the hall.

Town Administrator Nutting and Superintendent of Schools David Crisafulli will work in adjacent offices on the third floor.

The 25,000-square-foot building will give the town more space and parking, officials say. The current municipal building has 57 spaces for 65 employees; the Pastorello Building has 107 spaces of its own and shares eight with a neighboring property.

But more importantly, town councilors say, the building will help close the divide between town and school operations.

"The fact that we can bring both parties into one place so there's a lot of dialogue and discussion will be an asset," said Town Council Chairman Julio Renzi.

"In the past, there's been a lot of 'us and them'," Town Councilor Judith Pond Pfeffer agreed. "It should be 'us.'"

Along with better communication, the move will save the town the \$50,000 it pays to lease school administration offices each year.

At some point, officials also hope to save money by consolidating the town and school business and technology departments.

"First we're going to physically locate them together, then we're going to integrate them into a single operation," Nutting said. "That's going to take longer."

For all its amenities, older residents can remember times when the town never would have considered moving so close to the Wrentham town line.

Brunelli, 76, recalls in the 1940s, the land was known as Paine's horse farm.

"I can remember when I was a small kid, the train used to come in full of horses," he said. "They would bring horses in by train and then they would bring the horses right up (Rte.) 140 toward Wrentham to Paine's Farm."

### **Moving history downtown**

As town employees relocate to the Pastorello Building next summer, town councilors will be busy planning other moves.

The town's 20/20 plan also calls for construction of a new public works garage, Nutting said, and an architect will likely be hired in 2004.

In the interim, a lease must be secured for the public works and engineering departments -- now in the basement of the current municipal building.

Nutting said he wants to find these departments a temporary home shortly after other departments move so a new tenant can take over the municipal building as soon as possible.

While undecided about what kind of tenant they want at the site, town councilors agree the decision is an important one, affecting both the town's ability to pay off the Pastorello Building and the health of its downtown.

"The current town hall at that corner, it can be a key, kind of making a snowball effect, if we can get the right people there," Renzi said.

Across the street from the municipal building, Franklin's Council on Aging is planning its own move to the Four Corners Professional Building. This means the old Town Hall will need also need a new tenant.

Smith, the Historical Commission chairman, hopes to move the town museum there from the South Franklin Congregational Church on Washington Street, its home since 1972.

"It needs more space because now if we get anything, it has to be stored because there's just no floor or wall space left," she said.

Moving to the old Town Hall would increase awareness of the town's collection, Smith said, and is fitting given it is "the greatest example of Greek Revival architecture in town."

As for the church, it was deeded to the town with the condition that it goes back to the Congregational Church if Franklin stops using it for a year, Smith said.

The Historical Commission used to open the church, built in 1856, for Christmas Eve services and weddings until 1992, when its museum collection grew too large.

Smith wants to avoid losing the church by bringing weddings back. Under the town's watch, religion won't restrict access, she said.

"People could have weddings here and it wouldn't matter what faith you were," she said.

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