

NEWS

Yearning for a bygone era

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HOPEDALE -- Built shortly after residents separated from Milford, Hopedale's Town Hall became an instant gathering spot for more than just municipal business.

With a second-floor auditorium and commercial space, the granite and brownstone structure has been home to a grocery store, barber shop, basketball games and even record hops over the years.

Today, maintenance needs and federal disability regulations keep a large part of its space unused, leaving many younger residents unfamiliar with the building and older residents seeing it as little more than a symbol of the town's past.

"All it is is memories to me," said Robert "Zeek" Hammond, 82, a lifelong Hopedale resident. "I look up at the stage and I see school plays. All that's there for me is memories, how things used to be."

In recent years, the town has built a new junior-senior high school and a new fire station. Town Hall has seen ceiling work in the town clerk's office and gutter replacements, but little else, Selectman Alan Ryan said.

Given building debts and a tight economy, Ryan hopes the National Historic District designation Hopedale Village secured several years ago will open up grants opportunities.

This winter, the town plans to submit an application for funding through the Massachusetts Historic Commission. By adding an elevator and increasing the width of doorways, Ryan hopes to bring residents back to town hall.

"I really would love to see people come back in Town Hall to do things other than pay their bills or get their death certificates," he said. "It's a shame because people don't really utilize their town hall. It's their town hall."

George Draper, of the town's famed cotton-loom family, built the \$40,000 Town Hall in 1887 to celebrate Hopedale's separation from Milford the prior year.

Draper died before the building was finished and his heirs deeded it to the town. It was dedicated on Oct. 25, 1887, in a ceremony featuring a prayer by the Rev. Adin Ballou, the Practical Christian Socialism reformer whose followers settled in the area some 40 years earlier.

Designed by Boston architect Fred Swayze, the 20,000-square-foot structure is composed of Milford pink and gray granite and Longmeadow brownstone. Visitors are greeted at the entrance by stain-glass windows, installed with the original construction, Ryan said.

Different than many town halls, this building has always housed both business and town offices.

In the early 1900s, the building was home to the police department, 325-person town meetings and voting, Hammond said. Early businesses included a post office, dentist, grocer and an insurance office, Hammond said.

Today, the building's basement holds a couple of municipal offices, but is seldom used by the public.

Residents are more familiar with the first floor, where the town clerk works and the Board of Selectmen and other committees meet in the Draper Room, where the walls are lined with pictures of the Draper clan and a black wall vault that at one time likely held papers but now stands empty, according to Ryan.

Hopedale's Town Hall has had space for business over the years because many town offices operated from the Draper factory before it closed in 1980, Hammond said. Those municipal offices have since returned to town hall, squeezing out commercial tenants, except for Rebecca's Place restaurant.

While the restaurant continues a tradition that many enjoy, its location in the middle of the town offices blocks access, Ryan said. Visitors must use one door to enter the town clerk's office, then go back outside to get to building and zoning offices.

"It's just awkward," Ryan said. "It would be nice to be able to come in and access all the offices in one egress."

The second floor sees little use these days, holding the Patrick Meeting Room and offices for Town Coordinator Dan Keyes and his assistant.

These offices are built around an auditorium that now sits vacant, except for the town cable channel, which runs out of the backstage area. Keyes' office was previously a staircase leading to the stage.

Town officials say the room cannot be used for public events because it lacks an elevator, a requirement of the American Disabilities Act.

Ryan said he realized the impact of closing off the space a few years ago, when town officials opened up town buildings for public tours as part of the National Historic District application process.

"A lot of people who were new to town had never even been up to the second floor because we don't have meetings up there," he said.

Hammond, a 1942 Hopedale High School graduate, recalls days when the auditorium was well traveled, used for Saturday afternoon movies, school events and even basketball games before Draper Gym was built in the 1950s.

"Years ago, they used to have movies there and they used to have dances there and we used to put on high school plays there to raise money for Washington, D.C., trips," Hammond said.

In recent years, some have proposed converting the auditorium, which has a closet ticket booth, to additional office space. Ryan opposes this, preferring gatherings more like those Hammond remembers.

"I would love to see this restored as a meeting space for townspeople," Ryan said.

Ryan wants to see the third floor converted to office space. It remains unfinished, a century after Draper erected the building, holding a few old boxes and abandoned pieces of furniture.

"It's a huge open space," he said. "You could easily make a couple rooms up here."

The third floor needs more than finishing touches, though. Like the second floor, disability regulations block use of the third floor.

But regulations aside, Hammond said the stairs leading to the third floor, which are even steeper than those to the second floor, make its use unrealistic.

"I hate those stairs coming down," Hammond said. "I'd just assume come down backwards those stairs are so steep."