



# FIRE & HIGHWAY FACILITY PROJECT FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



*Town of Blandford | October 2022*

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## Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. Why do we need a new building for the Fire and Highway Departments?

The existing Fire Department garage at 93 Main Street is in poor condition and is not large enough to house the Department's apparatus. The existing Highway Garage up the hill is also not large enough to contain the entirety of the Department's fleet and other equipment. Both buildings, in use since at least the 1940s, are costly to heat and maintain. Ultimately, the Town will only be undermining its important investments in equipment upgrades for these departments if it does not provide the facilities needed to protect those assets.

### 2. What's the plan for replacing these buildings?

This project aims to right-size and modernize our Town's Fire and Highway facilities. A newly configured municipal campus would protect our assets and extend the useful life of our trucks, plows, backhoes, and roadwork materials, as well as improve the efficiency of our Fire Department services. Facing deteriorating conditions in both WWII-era garages, the need for this new facility is critical for the Town to care for roadways and property, as well as to provide the necessary emergency response services for residents.

The proposal calls for a consolidated Fire and Highway facility at the Highway Department's yard on **Chester Road**. The site allows ample space for the new building with minimal impacts to abutters. With limited properties available to the Town, the Building Committee determined that this was the best option for delivering a cost-effective solution to the challenges these Departments and the Town now face as the result of decades of deferred maintenance on the existing facilities.

### 3. What happened to just retrofitting the Highway Garage to serve as the Fire Station?

In May 2022, Weston & Sampson completed a **feasibility study** comparing the scenario of renovating the existing Highway building to serve as the Fire Station vs. demolishing that structure and constructing a new Fire Station. That study revealed that the cost to demolish the existing structure and build new was actually *lower* than retrofitting.

Another concern with the location of the current highway garage is the challenge it poses for the proposed **reconfiguration of North Blandford Road** where it intersects with Otis Stage Road (Route 23). If a new fire station was located at that site, parking would be limited for firefighters and there would likely be inadequate space to safely maneuver apparatus. By relocating both departments, the Town frees up that much more space for the proposed reconfiguration of the intersection that could improve roadway safety and support proposed enhancements to the Town Common.

Finally, after a review of the **potential financial impact** of an approach which called for the construction of two new buildings on two separate sites, it was determined by the Building Committee that a consolidated, single new build on the property that currently houses the Highway Department salt barn was ultimately a better option.

4. Is the Highway yard site close enough to the center of Town for **timely emergency response**?

Normal drivetimes between our volunteer firefighters' home addresses and the two sites were reviewed by the Town Administrator. A-back-of-the-envelope comparison showed that travel from home addresses to the Highway yard site added an average of three minutes. Keep in mind that this comparison used Google Maps drivetimes which are based on cell phone data that generally reflect driving in non-emergency situations. Massachusetts General Law allows a private firefighter vehicle to travel in excess of the posted speed limit while responding to an emergency call so long as its emergency vehicle lights are illuminated. Additionally, these differences in drivetimes may change as the makeup of our volunteer firefighting force shifts.

While a central location for Fire facilities would be ideal, the Town has to make use of its available properties. The preferred location will still ensure timely emergency response as indicated by the backing it has received from our Fire Chief and members of the volunteer force.

5. What **other Town-owned** sites were evaluated for the new facility?

Years ago, the Post Office (former Town Hall) was considered as a possible site for a new Fire garage. The Fire Department currently operates its office and training center out of this building, and it is one of the few Town-owned sites that is centrally located. However, the acreage of the site is fairly limited, and it closely abuts residential properties. Further, issues with the septic system on the site would make retrofitting or new construction more costly. Essentially all other Town-owned sites either already have a dedicated active use, or are unsuitable due to size, topography and/or location.

6. What about acquiring **privately-owned land**?

Other sites that have been discussed include privately-owned properties with abandoned homes and back tax issues. These would each require additional study and ultimately acquisition by the Town, extending the process of identifying an optimal site and potentially adding costs including negotiations with private owners, deed searches and site testing. Privately held land would also increase construction costs as there would need to be demolition of any existing structures as well as site work to make the land usable. While the Building Committee has undertaken preliminary review of several such sites, none have met the high bar that these costs merit for deeper consideration.

7. Is the **current Fire Station** building really in such bad shape? If it is, why wasn't it maintained?

In the past, other spending priorities for the Town always came before repairs and maintenance of the fire station. Little problems that had been ignored turned into major structural repairs. On numerous occasions, firefighters would make repairs on their own time and would even buy materials out of their own pocket just to try to keep the building in usable shape. The unfortunate result of past neglect is a structure that is hard to justify maintaining much longer. While the Town has turned a page and now carefully builds up reserves to keep our physical assets in good order, the time when this particular structure could be made to work for the Fire Department has passed.



1 Fire Garage exterior wall, 2018. Photo Credit: Ed Harvey, Former Fire Chief, Town of Blandford

#### 8. How much will this cost?

**A final construction cost estimate will not be available until the schematic design phase of the project is complete.** Rough cost estimates have ranged between a mid to high seven-digit figure through the course of the project depending on timing and the specific proposal being discussed. The Building Committee believes that a single, consolidated building will substantially reduce costs when compared to a two-building alternative. The most recent proposed design services contract was \$650,000 and the associated fee from the Owners' Project Manager (OPM) to complete work through design was roughly \$70,000.

#### 9. How will the Town pay for the design of the building?

A number of funding options are being explored. For the design phase, a portion of the \$650,000 designer services fee can be covered by the nearly \$700,000 in the Town's **Building Project Stabilization Fund**. The previous fiscal year's **Free Cash**, certified this October, totals around \$780,000 and a portion of this can be used as well. The availability of these pay-as-you-go options mean the Town is potentially positioned to cover the design phase of the project without resorting to borrowing.

Additionally, at the state level, other communities in Western Massachusetts have been awarded between \$50,000-\$100,000 in American Rescue Plan Act (**ARPA**) funds from the Commonwealth. When the legislature discovered in the waning days of this year's session that historically high revenues had triggered a mandatory refund to taxpayers, lawmakers elected to pause work on major **economic development and bond bills**. Efforts on this legislation may soon resume, presenting fresh opportunities for the Town to work with our elected officials on Beacon Hill to secure additional funds.

#### 10. How will the Town pay for the construction of the building?

For the construction phase of the project, there are at least three sources of outside funding that have been identified.

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First, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (**USDA**) Rural Development agency’s **Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program**. Funds from this program can be used to purchase, construct, and/or improve essential community facilities, to purchase equipment, and to pay related project expenses for any community with a population below 20,000. Under this program for example, the City of Greenfield recently received nearly \$1 million in grant funds for equipment associated with the construction of a new fire station. A loan from this program could enable the Town to lock in a low interest rate and make greater use of pay-as-you-go capital sources such as the Building Project Stabilization account and Free Cash.

Next, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has in recent years expended between 40% and 50% of Community Development Block Grant (**CDBG**) funds on public infrastructure and services. For example, in the FY20 round when Blandford received nearly half-a-million dollars for housing rehabilitation and an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) transition plan, other communities received millions for public infrastructure improvements

Lastly, the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economic Development Administration (EDA) hosts a **Public Works Program** that helps communities revitalize, expand, and upgrade their physical infrastructure. While EDA invested \$138.4 million in Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance construction projects in FY21, funding under this program may be harder for Blandford to come by as economic distress and development criteria might put the community at a disadvantage when applying.

Beyond these major sources of outside funding, project proponents are always on the lookout for opportunities to fund **individual elements** of the project. State Green Communities funding for example could potentially be used for energy efficiency components of the building. Inclusion of this project in plans around hazard mitigation, vulnerability preparedness and transportation planning could further open up the prospect of funding pieces of the project through state and federal programs.

Ultimately, projects of this magnitude always involve **debt**. However, with multiple potential federal and state funding sources, as well as strategic use of the Town’s reserves and annual Free Cash, the burden on Blandford taxpayers can be effectively mitigated. Further, the Town in recent years has enjoyed hundreds of thousands in annual Payments-In-Lieu-of-Taxes (PILOT) from solar developments and the Springfield Water & Sewer Commission. With a townwide Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) in development, Blandford will be able to lay out a schedule for the use of these types of funds and effectively offset debt on our large capital projects.

### 11. Why did we have to spend money hiring an owners’ project manager (OPM), and on designer services?

The Commonwealth places requirements on communities of all sizes when it comes to procurement of design and construction services for public works. Before contracting for design services in connection with a public building that is estimated to cost \$1.5 million or more, **every jurisdiction must contract with or assign a qualified OPM** to serve as the jurisdiction’s agent during the planning, design, and implementation of the contract.

Further, Towns are required to follow the **state’s designer selection law** in awarding any contract for design services for any building construction, reconstruction, alteration, remodeling, or repair project

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when the design fee is \$30,000 or more and the estimated construction cost of the project is \$300,000 or more.

From the start, there has been no scenario or plan where the Town's construction and design costs were below these thresholds. The Town has been careful to follow these state requirements throughout the process and has benefitted from the expertise of our qualified OPM, City Point Partners, as well as the selected design team, Weston & Sampson. Ultimately, this approach will allow the Town to deliver on a critical investment for the community that is above board, thoroughly vetted and fully eligible for state and federal funding.

### 12. Why have the **cost estimates increased** so much since the project started?

It is no secret that costs for all commodities have risen dramatically since the start of the pandemic. Construction costs in particular have increased at a pace that could not have been foreseen. These upwardly spiraling costs underline the need to act so that a solution can be implemented and prices locked in before the project becomes difficult for the Town to afford.

### 13. What happened to the **initial funding** authorized at the Town Meeting in March 2021?

A good portion of the initial \$120,000 in funding that was transferred out of the Building Projects Stabilization account has been expended as the Building Committee continually worked to streamline the project and bring the overall cost as low as possible while still doing needed due diligence for Blandford's taxpayers. The above-mentioned issues with rising prices, as well as dissatisfaction with the performance of the initially selected design team, added to the hurdles the OPM was asked to address by the Committee. The Town has gotten its money's worth with City Point Partners going above and beyond and assisting in identifying funding sources.

### 14. What's the **next step** for this project?

At Special Town Meeting, the Building Committee is asking for authorization to **transfer funds out of the Building Project Stabilization Fund as well as Free Cash** to cover the cost of the continued contract with City Point Partners, and fund the review and confirmation of the project concept as well as **schematic design** by Weston & Sampson. Funding for this portion of the design phase would amount to \$180,000 transfer out of Free Cash and \$75,000 out of the Building Project Stabilization account.

With Phases I & II of the design process slated for completion by roughly mid-spring of 2023, and cost estimates from the design team, OPM and an independent consultant in hand, the project will be ready for presentation at Annual Town Meeting in June. At this juncture, the Building Committee anticipates requesting funding of some or all of the remaining design development, construction documents, and bidding assistance as well as authorization of longer-term funding for actual construction.