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TOP STORY

Public gets a look at revamped Tower Street plans at public forum

By Ryan Blessing Sun staff writer
Sep 19, 2023

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Architect Meg Lyons reviews the existing Tower Street School building for the public Monday at a Westerly Town Council public

WESTERLY — More than a year after an initial brainstorming session, community members and town officials reconvened Monday at the Westerly Yacht Club to check the progress of plans to redevelop the former Tower Street School property.

The Town Council got an update on the work last month at a special meeting at the Westerly Education Center, one of the partner organizations that hopes to secure space in a new neighborhood community facility.

The first meeting, in July 2022, identified multi-generational programs for children and senior citizens, affordable housing for young families, recreation opportunities, and mental health support as needs that could be addressed. Most of that vision remains intact in the latest version presented by the Royce Family Fund and its consultants.

“We have a project we’ve been advancing for almost two years. We’re thrilled with where we are and can’t wait to show it to you,” Royce Family Fund head Charles “Chuck” Royce told the audience of about 100 at the yacht club.

More fully fleshed out over the course of 14 months, plans now are to demolish the 1950s school building — which the planners said has a mountain of safety issues that make it beyond salvageable as a modern facility.

In its place would rise a new two-story community hub, a \$30 million center with ample new gym and recreational space and room for a slate of potential town partners, including Wood River Health, the Westerly Education Center, the Ocean Community YMCA and others.

“It’s not really an end, it’s a beginning,” Royce Family Fund Secretary Nicholas Moore said. “We want to go ahead and finish up the work we’ve done and transition. The town has to go ahead and make the determination on how we proceed, but we think we have a good model and what we want to do is synthesize the things we’ve heard today, come back to the town in a very short time and see if we can go ahead and move this forward.”

The plans keep intact the on-site tennis courts, incorporate an outdoor play/activity area for children and a community garden space.

Because of wetlands on the property, only about 7.5 of the 11.25 acres are usable, although the building's footprint would be smaller than that of the school. Conceptual drawings also show rooftop areas for outdoor gatherings, and several attendees also said they'd like to see solar power incorporated.

Schematics of the inside show first-floor space for the town, including a gymnasium, and for Wood River Health Services as well as a common gathering area for other groups to meet. That extends to a second story that includes shared classroom or activity areas.

The venture would be a public-private partnership with minimal investment by the town. A Special Purpose Entity, a not-for-profit corporation governed by a board, would lease the property from the town.

Breaking down the costs, about 20% would come from the state, 25% from federal sources and 45% from private sources that fund not-for-profit activities. Just 10% would be from municipal or other sources. The town would continue to own the land.

Westerly resident Ayana Melvan, Mystic Aquarium's senior director of strategic partnerships for mission programs, said she's been passionate about the project for a long time.

In a prior role at United Way of Rhode Island, she was involved in "one of the very high-functioning, high quality summer learning programs in the state" in Providence. Westerly always was a strong collaborator with the program, she said. Melvan has seen special-purpose entities flourish in other parts of the country.

"They do work," Melvan said. "One thing that makes them work is true collaboration with the towns and cities that are a part of the process. The town does have to play a critical role in making sure the nonprofit entity that takes over this huge responsibility is supported."

Melvan also used an example of solar panels installed at the Cleveland Zoo's parking lot as shade for visitor cars.

"It reduced the temperature in the cars by 40 degrees," she said. The panels reportedly generated seven times the power that the zoo uses, she said.

"If we utilize the parking lot for solar, we can reduce the utility costs for the town in general," she said.

Special-purpose entities also broadly qualify for tax credits of up to 50% as part of the federal Inflation Reduction Act, she said.

"Heating systems, geothermals, anything you can think of to run a more efficient building, that might be able to cut that \$30 million in half," she said.

Some attendees stressed the need for affordable housing in town, a need shared by most communities. They said it would be a shame not to try to include some housing in the proposal.

"Affordable housing was the number one and number two issue brought up at the last meeting," South County Habitat for Humanity Executive Director Colin Penney said. "I know there's a lot of need in this town, but to not have affordable housing as a primary focus for the lot is quite disturbing."

Towns including Exeter and North Kingstown have increased their stock of such housing, he noted.

"This is a critical moment this town needs to address," he said.

The door is still open to some small-scale housing opportunities along Narragansett Avenue, although housing would not be one of the new building's uses, the consultants said.

Use of the building solely as a school ceased following the end of the 2008-09 school year. In subsequent years the School Department housed a few school functions in the building, developed a community center approach, and also leased space to organizations that tended to focus on education and social services for children and adults.

In 2020 the School Committee, under budgetary pressure from the Town Council, voted to stop using the property for school district activities. Tenants were helped to find other accommodations and the property eventually became the responsibility of the Town Council, which took steps to sell it but reconsidered in the face of criticism from former tenants and users and the interest of and involvement of the Royce Family.

The family fund entered into a lease-purchase agreement with the town for the property in December 2021. As part of the agreement, the fund committed to having the property inspected to determine the condition of the building and to facilitate a community-wide dialogue on potential uses of the property.

“We needed to think through what was the most optimal way to serve this community,” Royce said. “We’ve had dozens of one-on-ones and group meetings and are thrilled with the ideas we’ve gathered. We have a nice general direction.”

The lease-purchase agreement runs through Dec. 31 of this year. The Royce Family Fund has agreed to a request by the Town Council not to exercise its option to purchase.

Moore said discussions with the town would pick up as soon as next month and involve establishing a framework for the special-purpose entity and its governance board, among other issues.

“We want to have enough so that the town can look at this project and figure out whether it wants to go forward with this project or not,” he said.