Pomfret wants to make town hall an accessible community center

By Aaron Rubin
Standard Correspondent

The Pomfret Selectboard hopes to make over Pomfret Town Hall in order to meet energy and disability standards and foster a renewed sense of community with the help of a $4,000 grant from the state Municipal Energy Resilience Program (MERP).

According to Pomfret Selectboard member Meg Emmons, the town hall building was identified as a good candidate for the purposes of the grant.

"It's a wonderful historic building with so much cultural significance in our community," said Emmons. "Having been built in 1845, the town hall showcases that iconic New England charm but could use some work to bring the building up to modern energy efficiency standards."

Emmons says there are also outdated heating and water systems that are in need of restoration, and better insulation in the building is being considered.

According to Emmons, the "ultimate goal" is to apply for a second grant, namely an Implementation Grant "of up to $500,000" to meet energy needs. She says that 20% of those funds can be used to help towns meet ADA standards. That grant opportunity is expected to be open to the town at the beginning of next year.

Meanwhile, she says that "we'll be doing an energy assessment this summer and then using that to make decisions on what might need the most improvement."

The selectboard will use the $4,000 from the MERP grant received in May to conduct a feasibility study that will analyze how best Pomfret Town Hall can comply with American With Disabilities Act (ADA) standards, several of which the building does not currently meet.

"Right now we don't have handicap accessible bathrooms and there's only one entrance with a ramp. We need to have two exits that are handicap accessible," said Emmons.

Emmons says they've also considered turning the building's kitchen into a bathroom and adding more exit signs for safety.

"This would be an important step towards accessibility and inclusion," said Emmons.

Along with having more accommodations for residents with disabilities in Pomfret, Emmons hopes the improvements will spark greater community interest in using the town hall as a hub for town-sponsored and private events.

Emmons said that since the town shifted its election procedures from the traditional town meeting model to an Australian ballot process, and after losing other in-person events due to the pandemic, she believes the town has "valid concerns about the loss of tradition" in the community.

"I think people really want to bring back some more community events, especially now that Town Hall, which is iconic, [will not host] town meetings [next] year. So we want to bring back that community aspect."

Government informational sessions and community-wide strawberry suppers and harvest dinners are being considered for returns to the building, both of which can be supported if the kitchen gets a makeover, says Emmons.

Emmons adds that four-season weddings and funerals could also be supported.

Emmons said another idea the selectboard is considering is turning the kitchen into a catering-style setup — a less expensive approach than creating a new fully operating kitchen. There would be equipment such as warming plates instead of a new stove, allowing food to be prepared beforehand.

A new committee has already been created to help the town meet its goals and facilitate feedback on future events. Members include Emmons, Gennie Lawrence, Marie Cross, and Carrie Brickner.

Emmons said the overall objective of the group is "to assess the town hall's historic functionality and collect community feedback and engagement regarding ongoing utilization of the town hall by the public as sort of a community center."

In their work to modernize town hall and revitalize community events, Emmons said the committee will also respect the traditional New England-style architecture of Pomfret Town Hall and its "cultural significance" with any structural additions or changes in the future.

"We'd love to get the community involved and hear ideas that could guide any changes and improvements that are made to the building throughout this MERP process, so long as we get funding. It takes a village!"