



Town Meeting Approves Funding For Historic Renovation Of Hook Association HQ

by Tim Wood

CHATHAM --- Facing only limited opposition, the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association won voter endorsement at Wednesday night's special town meeting for community preservation funds to renovate the historic Captain Nathan Harding House in West Chatham, the group's future headquarters.

The \$185,136 request, approved on a voice vote of the 450 people attending the session, will cover the cost of renovating the exterior sides of the 105-year-old house which are visible from Main Street. The Hook Fishermen's Association signed a purchase and sales agreement for the property Tuesday with owners Gail and David Oppenheim, and expect to move in early next summer.

"This represents a public-private partnership that serves the entire community," said Susan Nickerson, executive director of the CCCHFA. The new headquarters at 1566 Main St. will help revitalize West Chatham and give the association more visibility in its efforts to protect and preserve commercial fishing, she said.

"We see ourselves as an integral part of the fishing community and the town, and ownership [of the building] will help enhance that," said John Pappalardo, the association's policy director and chairman of the New England Fisheries Management Council. The CPA funds, he added, were a "necessary and significant" element in the association's purchase of the property.

The association is conducting a \$1.2 million capital campaign for the purchase and associated expenses. This summer's Hooker's Ball raised \$175,000 toward the project, and the Oppenheims contributed \$100,000. Two other supporters gave \$100,000, and Nickerson said other donations were contingent on securing CPA funding.

Having a purchase and sales agreement in hand before the vote was one of several conditions the community preservation committee attached to their endorsement of the funding, said chairman John Kaar. Other conditions include a permanent historic easement covering the front, sides and roof visible from Main Street; replacement of the original barn, which was in poor condition and had to be torn down; a requirement that the renovations be done in accordance with Department of the Interior guidelines for historic preservation; and a clause in the purchase and sales agreement requiring that the purchase price be reduced by the amount of the community preservation funding.

In addition, said Kaar, the Oppenheims --- who, as owners of the property, were the applicants for the grant --- agreed that any unspent funds will be returned to the town and that they will pay any cost over the grant amount.

The finance committee backed the plan by a 7-1 vote. The board of selectmen also supported the request by a vote of three to one, with Chairman Ronald Bergstrom abstaining. Selectman David Whitcomb, who cast the sole dissenting vote, said it was irresponsible for the town to provide funds to a private developer while at the same time looking at the potential for a freeze on employee wages. The funds will allow construction of the barn, which will not replicate the original barn but will serve as meeting space for the association, he said.

“If they need that, I think they ought to pay for it, not the Chatham taxpayers,” Whitcomb said. Restrictions put in place by town regulatory boards guarantee that the building’s exterior is preserved, no matter who owns it, he added.

David Oppenheim, who is selling the property to the association at a below-market rate, said he purchased the historic home to preserve it, and will do so whether the deal with the group goes through or not. But he wanted to find the best use before moving forward. “We got very lucky” and found the association, which was looking for a permanent home.

There was never any intention to preserve the barn because of its poor condition, he added. But the association needed the meeting space, providing a reason to restore a barn that will appear much the same as the original structure.

“This is an opportunity now to do something positive,” Oppenheim said. “What we have here is an action plan.” The project meshes with the association’s mission of “preservation and sustainability,” he added.

One of the most visible buildings in West Chatham, the old farm house has had nothing done to it in years and it was “deteriorating before our eyes.”

“The biggest winner of all is West Chatham,” he said.

Speaking to concerns that the money would pay for a new barn, Selectman Florence Seldin said the town’s financial director will make sure that payments made are for the historic renovation. The town doesn’t pay out community preservation money to applicants, but pays bills as they are submitted.

“Be assured the money is going to renovation, and [Finance Director] Jennifer Petit will make sure that happens,” Seldin said.

Oppenheim said contractors on the job were willing to reduce their costs. “I can assure you the costs we’re getting are well below market,” he said.

Michael Westgate, the association’s treasurer, said the association


will end up paying about \$104 per square feet for the building, which is half of what it would have cost to renovate the so-called Hotel at the town-owned MCI property, which the group had investigated as possible headquarters before rejecting the idea as too expensive. The group has been assured a mortgage will be “no problem,” he said, but added that without the CPA funds, “this project could be dead.”

After about 30 minutes of discussion, Deputy Moderator David Nixon called for the vote, which he declared passed by a “very clear majority.”

In the weeks before the meeting, the association conducted a PR blitz to encourage attendance at the meeting and support for the request. Voters received letters and phone calls asking for support of the funding. Less than an hour after Wednesday night’s meeting ended, the association sent out a press release announcing the successful vote.

“Preserving and occupying this historic sea captain’s home is an ideal fit for our mission and for the town,” Nickerson said in the press release.

The Oppenheims purchased the house, and an adjacent vacant lot, for \$725,000 last November.

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