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Gilmanton residents want town hall entrance unlocked

By BEA LEWIS Union Leader Correspondent Jan 3, 2019 Updated Jan 4, 2019



A petition warrant article asks that the entrance doors at Gilmanton's municipal offices be unlocked and accessible to the public "without hindrance/buzzers at any/all times that town business is being conducted in the building."



BEA LEWIS/UNION LEADER CORRESPONDENT

GILMANTON – Some residents are apparently disgruntled with the selectmen’s decision to keep the front door at the town offices locked during business hours, requiring customers to be buzzed in via a secure rear door.

A petition warrant article asks that the entrance doors to Gilmanton Academy, which serves as municipal offices, be unlocked and accessible to the public “without hindrance/buzzers at any/all times that town business is being conducted in the building.”

Last March, two weeks after the town offices closed abruptly for half a day, and access to the building was restricted upon reopening, selectmen announced their decision was prompted by a series of factors.

Key among them was an onslaught of Right-to-Know requests that became so burdensome that staff were overwhelmed and were being kept from their ordinary duties by the need to lawfully comply. The board also suggested that the demeanor of a few of those making the requests for information caused some employees to fear for their safety.

During a Wednesday night public budget hearing, residents learned that an assessing position has been restructured and re-titled clerical researcher. The same number of employees will remain in the executive office, but one person will spend up to 20 hours a week responding to Right-to-Know requests and doing other needed research.

Selectmen oppose a warrant article to spend \$30,000 to replace the metal roof on the Gilmanton Iron Works Fire Station.

Newly hired Town Administrator Patrick Boré said selectmen do not support the request because the agreement detailing ownership of the building cannot be found, and the fire chief obtained just a single bid for the work.

“At some point something was done wrong and it needs to be addressed,” Boré commented.

Fire Chief Paul Hempel said the firemen’s association leases the station to the community for \$1 a year on the condition the town assumes maintenance of the building, but conceded a copy of the original agreement has yet to be located.

He had two contractors look at the roof and used their estimates to put out a request for proposals. Given that the building houses several million dollars worth of town-owned firefighting equipment, Hempel said, the roof should be kept in good repair.

Budget Committee Chairman Brian Forst said he was inclined to vote in support of fixing the roof on a building “that the town has paid to maintain for a lot of years,” prompting many taxpayers in the room to signal their agreement.

Heather Carpenter, assistant town administrator, said the administration is trying to address errors that continued solely because it had been long-standing past practice.

Other warrant articles voters will be asked to consider include an \$11,000 appropriation to fund a detailed assessment on the condition of the Old Town Hall. The town would apply for a \$4,500 grant through the NH Preservation Alliance to offset some of the cost. The condition assessment will provide recommendations on prioritizing the repairs that should be completed and estimates of the cost of the work that can then be shared with taxpayers.

Voters this year will again be asked to add \$30,000 to the Court Cases Non-Capital Reserve Fund established in 2003. Residents rejected a similar request last year. In 2018 the town spent more than \$107,000 on legal costs and several cases remain pending.

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