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Public Weighs In On Community Center Planning

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By: Ryan Bray

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Sharon Basso (center) and others consider possible locations for a new community center at the Orleans Department of Public Works building Monday night. RYAN BRAY PHOTO

ORLEANS – Multi-colored post-it notes canvassed the walls of the cafeteria in the public works building on Giddiah Hill Road Monday afternoon. Together, they may offer a vision for a new community center in town.

That's the hope of the town's community center feasibility task force, which held a public workshop to get input on what residents and town officials want to see out of a new building.

The workshop is the latest effort by the task force and its consultant, Abacus Architects and Planners, to gather community feedback on the project. The task force also prepared a 65-page survey asking participants what they wanted to see out of a community center, which garnered more than 430 responses.

"You guys are the experts in Orleans," David Eisen of Abacus told attendees of Monday's workshop. "This is about a dialogue."

Results of the survey showed strong support for a multipurpose building that can serve people of all ages, from young children and families to seniors. The center should also be built close to downtown and other community resources such as schools, and should be able to connect into town sewer, the survey found.

The task force in recent months has discussed how to share programming between a new community center and a new Snow Library, plans for which are being undertaken by the library's board of trustees. Eisen said as of now, the plan would be for a community center to house art, fitness and other forms of active programming. The task force is looking at six possible scenarios for a new center; small, medium and large facilities each with and without space for a new council on aging.

Eisen said tentative square footage for a new facility could range anywhere from about 11,000 square feet on the small side to something as big as 33,000 square feet. A larger facility might include a gymnasium that could also function as a space for banquets and events, he said.

But the task force also needs to work around the lack of available space for new development in town.

"In Orleans, I think we can safely say they're making less land," Eisen said.

That lack of available land has led the task force to explore the option of folding a new council on aging building into community center planning. Eisen said it's possible that the town may need to relocate the existing senior center on Rock Harbor Road further inland over the next decade due to sea level rise.

Talk of incorporating a new senior center into the planning was met with concern by some in attendance at the workshop who said it would inflate the cost of a new community center. But Andrea Reed, who in addition to serving on the task force also chairs the select board, said while the senior center has been closed at times due to flooding in recent years, it's too soon to make any decisions about how the council on aging fits into plans for a new center.

"The outcome of this study could be that the select board needs to engage the community in doing further research on the viability of the COA where it is," she said.

The approximately 40 attendees at Monday's workshop broke into small groups, each of which were asked what they hoped to gain out of a new center, whether they wanted a multigenerational building or one catering more toward a particular group, what their priorities for community center programming would be and what they believe needs to happen to make the project a reality.

The majority of respondents expressed support for a multigenerational building geared toward programming for both seniors and families with young children. Family, social and fitness activities were among the highest prioritized programs.

Respondents said that cost and location are among the most important factors in making a new community center a reality. Support was also voiced for the sharing of community resources and the ability for the center to expand in the future if needed.

Attendees were also asked to identify areas of town on a map that they thought might be ideal for siting a community center. Joan Francolini said the town's industrial area, which she called "hip" and "chic," is an area of town worth exploring.

"The whole area is ripe for the taking" she said.

Others favored Orleans Elementary School land, which some said would encourage multigenerational use of the new building. The community garden on Tonsett Road, the former Ted's Garage on Route 6A, Post Office Square and land in the area of the Hot Chocolate Sparrow and the artist cottages were also suggested as potential sites.


Fritz Luft, who chairs the task force, said the group will sort through the findings offered through the workshop in the coming weeks. The group plans to prepare a report and presentation on where the project stands to the select board on Oct. 12.

"What we're laying down is a conceptual basis for a community center that understands the town," he said.

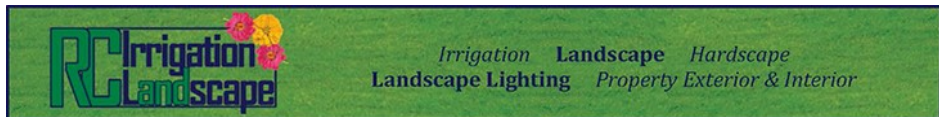
Additional public workshops could be held in the future as community center planning continues, Luft said.

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