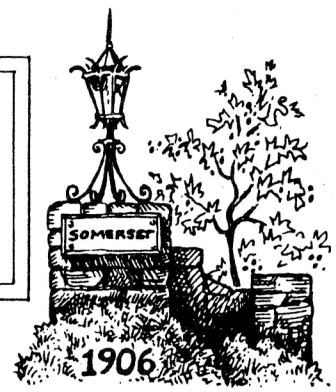


SOMERSET TOWN JOURNAL



Volume 51, Special Issue

October 17, 2006

Special Issue on Proposed Improvements for the Town Swimming Pool, Bathhouse and Town Hall

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Inserts:

O’Neil & Manion, Draft Analysis and Evaluation of Proposed Improvements for the Swimming Pool, Bathhouse and Town Hall

VIKA Engineers, Town of Somerset Bathhouse Expansion Study Summary

The Special Meeting on Pool Bathhouse and Town Hall renovations has been postponed for one week. It is now scheduled for Monday, October 30, beginning at 7:30 p.m. at the Town Hall. We regret any inconvenience.

Editors' Note: This Special Issue of the Town Journal is devoted to a discussion of improvements to the Town's facilities: specifically the Pool Bathhouse and Town Hall. It serves as food for thought for the forthcoming Special Meeting to be held on Monday, October 30, at 7:30 p.m. at the Town Hall.

The articles included in this Journal are the product of the special meeting that was held on September 25 at which the architects retained by the Town to look into the feasibility of a number of options for renovating the Pool Bath House and Town Hall, presented their findings and draft Report. Some 45 residents attended that meeting and were given copies of the Architects' Draft Executive Summary (the draft summary and the full draft report are now available on the Town website at www.townofsomerset.com and residents are urged to look at it). The Executive Summary is an insert to this Journal; while still a draft, this version includes some corrections and amendments from the preliminary draft. It sets the scene for the opinions that follow.

Thanks to all of those who took the time to put pen to paper to begin to crystallize and share their thinking on these important issues.

The next step will be taken at the Special Meeting on October 30 when the Council will hear more from residents and decide which options should be pursued in greater detail, and with further resident input through the use of charettes or other participatory tools.

Pool and Town Hall Improvements

Mayor Walter J. Behr

Fixing or replacing the 35-year old swimming pool bathhouse is imperative since the pump room ceiling has failed and could collapse. To fix the problem a major renovation or replacement of the building is required. I recommend replacement since our architects have warned of potential pitfalls if we repair the existing structure.

Along with replacing the bathhouse, we need a rain shelter to accommodate 200, a wider walkway on the Somerset House side of the pool with steps to the deck and a number of upgrades to the wading pool, including heated water and handicap access.

Including "soft" costs such as design, legal, engineering and permit fees and inflation, the total cost of these improvements could approach \$2.5 million. I recommend that we pay \$1.5 million of this from our surplus (leaving us with about \$700,000 in that account)

and that we borrow \$1 million. As a prosperous municipality we can borrow at a very favorable rate.

The Town Hall is also in dire condition. It is imperative that we authorize work on the building's foundation as soon as we succeed in negotiating a reasonable price.

As for other necessary repairs and improvements, we cannot, in my opinion, afford major projects at the pool and Town Hall at this time without a big tax increase since remodeling the Town Hall could cost another \$1.5 million or so. I sincerely hope and expect that we will be in a position to undertake this project promptly after the pool improvements have been completed.

On My Mind

Council member Jeffrey Slavin

It seems that more of us are in agreement now that the Town Hall needs to be "restored" and not torn down and that the Pool House is in worse shape than we originally thought. Since we will soon be making decisions that will have long term impact, we need to keep an open mind about expanding the ability to make maximum use of both sites according to what the current population and future populations of the Town require.

I am pleased with the work of our architects to date as they have provided solid objective information on a range of options and the feasibility of each. And while the costs are a great deal higher than we anticipated even a year ago, Somerset does have the resources to pay for these vital assets without having a serious impact on our pocketbooks.

Since Phase I of our plan is complete, I am looking forward to Phase II, which involves development of a master plan and use of charrettes. Concurrently, it is important that all of us disseminate what we know to others and share points of view whenever we can.

Because the architects have indicated that it will take a minimum of a year between the time that final decisions are made and when we can actually start construction, it appears that we won't be able to start the Pool House until October of 2008, as we cannot lose a swimming season. The Town Hall can probably be done first. However, as I have said over and over, it is vital that we make our choices about both sites at the same time. There is still uncertainty as to which functions are best suited for each. We cannot rush this vote just because we are weary of dealing with the issues for so long. We need more time to consider the facts and listen

to the needs of the citizens, but it is my hope that we can accomplish this by the end of the year.

The Future of Our Town's Facilities

Council members Tom Eldridge and Lesley Simmons

We believe any decision on the future of our Town's facilities should satisfy six basic principles:

First, the Town should address in a holistic way the need to renovate both the pool and Town Hall facilities since both are in need of substantial repairs. This is not an either/or debate in our view. Proposed improvements should enhance our sense of community, and increase amenities to residents, in the aggregate.

Second, in considering options at the pool, we must acknowledge those limitations on our ability to use the site created by environmental laws and regulations which were not in place when the facility was originally built. Our Town Attorney should review and validate the architects' findings and we must be realistic in the face of the potential legal obstacles to construction there.

Third, the pool must be a safe place for people gathered there during a thunder storm.

Fourth, the Town Hall should continue to be the administrative center of the Town, and have assembly space -- adjacent to Town offices and documents -- to accommodate Town meetings.

Fifth, the Town should consider the interests of neighbors to Town facilities, who are accustomed to a quality and quantity of use of those facilities.

And sixth, we must craft a fiscally responsible proposal for improvements to facilities that the Town can afford through initial capital outlays and borrowing, and longer-term maintenance costs.

Based on the data we have collected on the subjects over the past four years, information provided by the architects, and pending further input from residents and our Town Attorney, we believe that the Town should pursue the development of more detailed plans as follows:

- Renovate and completely update the pool house facility within its existing footprint (Option 1A of the architect's report);
- Build a new rain and lightning shelter located somewhere on the existing pool deck (Option 4);
- Improve the raised portion of the deck at the pool;
- Provide new amenities for the wading pool (Option 5);

- Build a new community addition to the town hall building and make necessary repairs and renovations to the existing town hall building (Option 7).

In addition, we propose examining the engineering, regulatory and fiscal feasibility of locating a set of indoor lap lanes at the Town Hall site, which does not have the same environmental sensitivity as the swimming pool complex and likely would not face the same approval challenges.

We realize that our proposal will disappoint those who would like less change, as well as those who would like a bigger year-round facility at the pool. However, we believe our approach is the most consistent with the principles outlined above and is the most sensible way forward.

Our two major Town facilities are failing structurally, so we must approach their renovation with an appropriate sense of urgency. Fortunately, we now have good data and useful expert advice to help us through this process.

Based on the evidence collected so far, we believe our proposal meets the needs of the majority of residents, is most likely to win approval in today's challenging development climate, and is the most cost-effective.

We look forward to hearing from residents on this important topic.

Facilities Expansion

Sue Besharov (Cumberland)

Both the Pool House and the Town Hall need to be renovated with some improvements. The pool is the wonderful core of our community during the summer. Happily its use has increased over the years, and the pool house is showing its age. For the Town Hall, the increased needs are administrative.

In deciding the scope of these projects, both the size of our population and other close-by facilities available to us should be central considerations. We should not build facilities that are too large or expensive for us and then look for support by charging fees to non-residents. This would not be in the spirit of a small residential community like ours.

Expanded meeting room(s) are one proposed improvement beyond our needs. In the architects' draft proposal, at both facilities meeting rooms for 200 people and 1600 square feet were included, which seems way too large at either location. The minor inconvenience of reserving a room at the school for an occasional large

meeting is easily offset by cost effectiveness. (And, once facility issues are resolved, it may be years before another large meeting!)

In the Long Range Planning Committee Survey, expanding the Town Hall was among the lowest priorities across all demographic groups. Only 21% of respondents rated it as "very high" or "high," while 55% rated it as "low," "very low," or "do not want"; an additional 5% gave no answer, clearly also not seeing it as a priority.

Our Town's Precious Pool Site

Joan McWilliams Weiss (Essex)

As major construction and traffic crowd Bethesda and Friendship Heights, we are so fortunate to have our swimming pool nestled in a lovely setting of woods and stream. This was a real achievement, against all odds, and quite a story as told by the late Hobart Rowen in Somerset's 1981 Diamond Jubilee publication.

Rowen, a Town Councilman and later Vice-Chairman (1957-1965), wrote a riveting history of how our small town's long, hard struggle -- led by the late Mayor Warren J. Vinton and a number of Somerset citizens -- could not stop the development. But despite tremendous pressure from developers, and a little support from the courts, it did win the 12 acre buffer zone (now Vinton Park, which includes our pool) to protect the Town.

In 1976, the pool was dedicated with the bronze plaque in memory of the late Jerald F. Goldberg, who succeeded Vinton as mayor. Now Mayor Behr, our Council Members, and we ourselves have the responsibility of preserving this precious site for future generations. It is my hope that while we consider practical aspects and cost, we will keep our project "green", and design it to fit beautifully and safely into the natural environment!

Towards a Year-round Community

Alan W. Dock (Falstone)

A major factor influencing our decision to settle in Somerset was the wonderful sense of community and communication we have here on issues affecting residents. As we've just ended another season at the pool, I'm reminded of how much this shared place contributes to our community. I've become convinced that it would enormously benefit Somerset to create other amenities that would sustain the sense of community generated in the summer, through the fall and winter, and into the spring.

It's with this vision in mind that a number of us formed the "ad hoc" Committee for Year-Round Community Facilities.

We have met several evenings, and as a way of responding to the Mayor's appeal for views on the pool and Town hall, some of us have penned pieces for this Special Journal Issue, which we hope illuminate the various possibilities. While authored by individual residents, they represent the distillation of the ad hoc committee's discussions.

Florence Gang presents a senior resident's perspective. Jill Caporale and David Kathan have tried to formulate a vision of what a 'mixed use' would mean for the enhanced facilities. And Frank Loversky and Sarah Morse have addressed the needs of the year-round swimming adherents. Jeff Lape reviews environmental constraints and shows how we can improve environmental conditions while obtaining expanded amenities. Finally, Alan Proctor addresses the all important question: Can we afford it?

Our informal poll found some 108 residents strongly support the overall objective of a year round community! If you would like to join us in supporting this objective, please e-mail Alan Proctor (alan@proctors.us), or myself (alandock@hotmail.com), and we will put you on the mailing list. Also let us know if you would like to join the committee.

Elsewhere in this issue of the journal you will find the committee's reaction to the Architect's Draft Report. We will be presenting more substantial comments at the special Town Council meeting on Monday, October 30.

A Senior Citizen perspective

Florence Gang (Falstone)

Somerset is a great place to raise children – but it is also a great place for Senior Citizens embarking on the second act of their lives.

I am an artist, who has lived in Somerset for more than 50 years, and has been part of the many changes in the community. I have enjoyed the pool since it was built, and was involved in starting water aerobics classes. I occasionally rent the Town Hall for my art shows and family birthday celebrations.

Many of my senior friends have planned to or have left Somerset to live in senior residences where activities are scheduled and enjoyed year round. Some continue to live here, but travel outside the Town to

bridge groups, book clubs, water aerobic classes, and exercise and yoga classes.

Somerset could accommodate the interests of these seniors in our town by developing year round, environmentally sensitive facilities, for example, an indoor pool and social activities room, and thus meet the needs of all our town residents -- from strollers to walkers!

Build it and They Will Come

Jill Caporale (Dorset) and David Kathan (Dorset)

We are proponents of year round swimming and a larger community space that would include a multi-use great room, and could also include a small reading room and workout room.

Most years after the pool closes our bathing suits rarely see daylight. Between work, taking care of kids and making sure homework is done there is rarely enough time to hop in the car, sit in traffic, change, swim, change, hop in the car, sit in traffic and get ready for the next day!

The management of the rooms and the indoor pool facility could be time allocated to accommodate the various needs of community members. The pool could have separate hours for lap swimmers, swim team, young rompers and seniors.

A great room could be used for large community gatherings such as town meetings, music recitals, yoga, movie nights, and dances (get those gray-suits to kick up their feet).

Adding a small reading room would provide a great place to find a book, meet a neighbor and share a cup of coffee.

There could be special times and events for adults and stay-at-home parents with young children. This would also enhance the community for our seniors by providing them with a gathering place, and allowing them to continue a social and involved lifestyle.

Didn't we move here to be part of an involved, yet convenient community?

A Year-round Pool

Sarah Morse (Dorset) and Frank Loversky (Warwick)

Pool activities are an integral part of the Somerset summers. We believe that these activities should be extended year-round with a dual-season pool that would be covered with an inexpensive bubble for use in the colder months.

A pool is not just for lap swimmers or kids. Exercise becomes more crucial as we age. Seniors enjoy water aerobics and lap swimming during the summer. Dads and Moms who commute value the opportunity to swim after work. A year-round pool in our neighborhood would allow them to continue their summer routines without the extra travel time.

How do you put a measure on the value of this daily aerobic activity?

Families sometimes make the trek to the Aquatic Center to let their kids play in the water, but many pass on this winter activity as too time consuming. An indoor pool of our own would make this favorite activity convenient as well as provide opportunities for swim lessons, water baby classes, aerobics, a winter stroke and turn clinic for swim team members and of course, lap swimming.

How could we meet all these needs?

A dual-season pool would make swimming a year-round activity and allow the whole town to continue to enjoy the activities that are so valued in the summer. As an additional bonus, in the summer, the extra pool could be dedicated to fitness, so that lap swimmers, aerobic classes, and other activities would not have to compete with the swim team, the diving board and other main pool activities for pool space.

Please join with us and urge the Council to make this vision a reality for the Town.

Improving the Environment and Expanding Our Pool Facilities – A Win-Win Approach

Jeff Lape (Dorset)

Somerset's pool has been an integral part of our community for the past 35 years. As we consider ways of expanding upon this community resource, we will need to address a range of issues. There has been much rhetoric that we "cannot do anything at the pool" because of environmental concerns (e.g. floodplain, riparian buffer). This simply is not true.

On March 1, 2006, the Town's engineer (VIKA) and several residents met with Marion Clark of the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC). Marion clearly indicated that an environmentally sensitive expansion of the pool house could be considered by MNCPPC. VIKA's discussions with the County Department of Permitting Services had a similar result; their willingness to consider a modest expansion of the facility.

The Town can design a larger and enhanced pool facility, with support from the regulatory agencies that would have less environmental impact as compared to the existing facility. Here are some examples:

- construct a new pool house that is a “green building” (i.e. energy efficient and environmentally sensitive)
- connect the deck drains and roof drains to “French drains” to reduce runoff and recharge ground water
- provide a greater setback between the parking lot and the streambank and plant trees for increased erosion control
- provide treatment of the pool backwash water before discharge into the stream
- reduce the overall area of impervious surface

We can actually improve the environmental conditions in the area of the pool while at the same time expanding our community facilities.

A Community Facility: An Affordable Investment

Alan Proctor (Cumberland)

I’d like to explain why I think a year-round community facility would potentially be an excellent, affordable investment, well worth further refining through the planned series of community meetings.

There are for me two key points to consider in thinking about the estimated capital costs of a possible community facility. First, we’re talking about an investment in a long-term asset that our community will enjoy for decades to come. Second, our investment can easily be financed with no increase in taxes or other charges through a long-term mortgage that spreads the cost out over the next 30 years at annual rates that are easily managed from the current surplus in our budget. (Based on the cost of \$3.6 million as estimated by the Architect for Option 1E, almost half of which is in any event required simply to replace the failing bath house structure, and assuming a down payment of \$1 million from the current Town surplus, we would be taking on annual debt service cost of about \$180,000, which is less than half of our current budget surplus.

Operating costs must also be considered, but could be manageable. We would design much of the facility for unattended use, which is how the Town Hall is used after hours now; and where we need an attendant in place, we have a number of relatively low-cost alternatives available, including drawing on volunteer and paid residents who might enjoy working at the community facility.

The return on this investment would be great. It’s certainly worthwhile in monetary terms, since local realtors regularly point to our community and investment in community resources as a key contributor to high property values, and this investment would only further enhance them. But beyond the dollar return, there’s what we earn as a community. Imagine we take the wonderful sense of community we have at the pool now, during the swim season, and extend it, to fully embrace the entire community, from our youngest to our most senior residents, and make it accessible on a year-round basis. That’s worth a lot and I think it’s an investment well worth making.

On Operating Costs

Corrie Morsey (Surrey)

As stated in the Architects’ Executive Summary report “. . . both the Bathhouse and the Town Hall have significant structural problems that need to be addressed promptly. Both buildings are in urgent need of repair and renovation”. Depending upon the options chosen by the Town, the obstacles we face in implementing them are either few or numerous as detailed by O’Neil and Manion Architects. Generally speaking, the grander in scope the improvement, the lengthier and more costly the permitting process (with no guarantees the Town will be granted a variance/waiver). We’ve been studying and discussing this for more than three years and the Town’s inability to make any decision to repair/improve these structures continues to drive up associated costs.

How are operating expenses going to be paid once construction is completed? I don’t want my taxes increased to cover projected costs for “country club” amenities. Operating expenses for the swimming pool were \$111,605 in 2005 or \$268.93 a household. (The 2006 swimming pool financial report has not been compiled.) Estimated annual operating expenses for the various options are:

<u>Options</u>	<u>Annually</u> <u>(today’s dollars)</u>	<u>Per Household</u> <u>(today’s dollars)</u>
1A, 1B, 4, 6,	128,000	308.43
1C	360,000	867.47
1D, 1D-2 levels	480,000	1,156.63
1E, 1E-2 levels, 3	732,000	1,763.86
2	892,000	2,149.40

Option 7 was omitted since it deals solely with the Town Hall, which serves to administer and govern the Town. It is a necessity, not an amenity like the swimming pool.

A Modest Improvement of our Existing Pool Facility

Stan Weiss, Member Pool Committee and
Pool House Survey Committee

In their comprehensive report, O'Neil & Manion described alternatives for our pool's future. In our recent Pool House Survey, almost two-thirds of the Town wanted to maintain the existing facility or have only modest renovations. That mandate should frame the parameters of our undertaking here.

O'Neil & Manion stressed that anything beyond modest changes close to the current facility's "footprint" could (i) create expensive, code-related legal challenges (potentially delaying any construction for years), and (ii) risk damaging the existing, structurally-sound pool.

If we went to year-round swimming -- a proposition opposed by nearly 60% of survey respondents -- construction costs would rise substantially while operating costs skyrocket. It appears that a two-lane lap pool would raise operating costs about \$800 to \$1,500/household/year (depending on how the expanded heated bath house is utilized) above the cost of our current swimming season. Even just a fitness room would add almost \$300/household/year.

I would enjoy swimming here year round. However, for the small percentage of our residents these two lap lanes would serve, their high cost and potential code problems put an unfair burden on the community. Many nearby facilities offer year-round swimming and fitness rooms at a reasonable cost!

Let's modestly improve our existing pool facility through renovation and/or reconstruction. Without having to deal with the pool site's severe code restrictions, a larger meeting room can easily be included in the repairs/renovations project for our year-round Town Hall, which is already staffed.

Response to the Architects' Report on Town Facilities Options

Mark Muro, Jeff Lape, Jeremy Stone, Jill Caporale, Jim Vanderzon, Kathy Hill, Keith White, Lindsey Van Vliet-Gerber, Alan Dock, Lydia Kleiner, Nancy Batson, Sarah Morse, Stanley Scheiner, Alan Proctor, Blair Levin, Cathi Davis, Daniel Sigelman, David Batson, David Kathan, Deborah Schechter, Florence Gang, Frank Loversky, Jeanette Kreiser, Jeff Aron

Late last month, the architecture firm of O'Neil & Manion Architects P.A. submitted to Somerset's Town Council a preliminary "pre-design phase draft

report" evaluating a variety of options for improving the town's swimming pool, bathhouse, and town hall.

As citizens with a keen interest in ensuring that our town objectively assess all of the available options for such improvements, the ad-hoc Year-Round Community Facilities Committee welcomes the information contained in O'Neil & Manion's preliminary report.

Unfortunately, though, we are also deeply concerned about the premature release and possible use for decisionmaking of this as-yet-un-vetted draft report.

Overall, we believe the draft report responds adequately to much of the scope of work that was issued by the town. However, we also find that several of the representations and opinions that are expressed in the draft report require clarification and render the document unready to be used in its present form to guide decisionmaking.

Among the problems are these:

Premature or otherwise unbalanced statements about feasibility

The report contains several unsubstantiated statements about the feasibility of various options. For example, the report contains a number of statements that, based on frequently partial information, at times run counter to more favorable statements by regulatory officials included in a recent town engineer's report. For example:

- The new report declares that three options for bathhouse or pool renovation are "not likely to receive jurisdictional approval" because "parts of the pool and pool deck encroach upon the 100-year floodplain" of the Little Falls Branch. However, a separate report prepared by VIKA*, the town's engineer, which the architects were presumably provided, concludes that the 200-year floodplain is likely located entirely within the channel of the stream. That means the pool site is likely adjacent to but not within the floodplain, and that a modest expansion of the facility may well be possible
- The report refers to "adverse impacts on specimen sized trees." However, it does not appear that any such trees would be impacted by any of the options
- The report assumes that several options would add impervious surfaces to the site. However, the O'Neil & Manion report fails to note, as the town engineer's report does, that other surfaces

could be removed to offset any new impermeable surfaces

Incompletely documented cost estimates

The annual operating costs provided in the architect's report deserve much more explanation with respect to their underlying assumptions. For example, the daily operating hours are not clearly evident. Also, the report should clearly identify the current operating costs for the pool based on the current season (May through early October) to make clear the incremental additional operating costs estimate.

Options needing further clarification

Several of the pool-related options are narrowly characterized and require further information to fully characterize them for evaluation. One description declares that lap lanes "would have to be located on the existing pool deck, either beyond the pool or in the area between the pool bathhouse and the pool, limiting expansion of the bathhouse", while failing to explore other potential options. For example, the lap lanes could potentially be enclosed in the area that is now the front of the pool house.

Unsubstantiated statements

In addition, a number of statements or characterizations within the O'Neil & Manion report lack the support needed to determine their accuracy. For example, there is no information on the formal designation of the stream channel to indicate that the wooden deck area at the pool overhangs the stream channel. The reference to needing parking based on a pool occupancy of 470 people does not correspond to pool usage patterns. And it is not fully accurate to say that the Town Hall has "significant structural problems" that "are in urgent need of repair" in light of inspections by structural engineers that have shown that while the Town Hall foundation does have two areas of deterioration, no evidence exists of shifting or movement.

In sum, we appreciate the architects' efforts to analyze a wide range of possible infrastructure improvements for the town, but find their report—in its current preliminary and un-vetted form—will require significant additional elaboration if it is to provide a basis for decisionmaking by the Town on pool improvements. For that reason, we hope that Somerset residents and the town council will seek more facts and significant revisions of the O'Neil & Manion report

before using it to determine a course of action as the town considers improvements of its community facilities. It is absolutely essential that our study process be absolutely factual and objective with respect to the framing and costing of the various options open to the town if our community is to make informed decisions.

****Editors' Note: The 3 page summary of the report entitled: "Town of Somerset Bath House Expansion Study", April 10, 2006 is included as an insert to this Journal, a further 25 pages of Technical Annexes are available for reference at the Town Hall. On Tuesday, October 17, the Mayor requested VIKA, Inc. to send a digital version of their October 2005 report to post on our website. The Report is entitled "Somerset Pool and Bathhouse 100-Year Flood Estimation Study – Little Falls Stream Branch". Through his Executive Assistant, Chuck Irish, VIKA's Chief Executive Officer, requested that we not circulate any part of the study because of inaccuracies. At press time the Mayor had not succeeded in reaching Irish for an explanation.***

The Town Journal is the official publication of the Town of Somerset, Montgomery County, MD.

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