



Sharon Historical Commission honors Wilber apartment builders

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Wicked Local Sharon

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SHARON — The fact that Sharon has many historical sites of interest is not in doubt for a town that was founded in the 17th century.

But sites of historical interest under discussion at the town selectmen's meeting on Tuesday resonated with more recent times.

First, Sharon Historic Commission, represented by its Chairman David Martin, accompanied by commission members Shirley Schofield and Gordon Hughes, were there to present the annual historic preservation award to two of the developers of the now-restored Wilber High School.

Receiving the award were Joseph Timilty, of Frontier Enterprises, a Canton-based company that focuses on housing and rehabilitating historic buildings for modern use. He was joined by Pam Goodman, president of Beacon Communities Development, LLC, a company who name has become synonymous in town with the Wilber School's conversion to apartments.

Accepting the award, Timilty thanked the Historic Commission and the Board of Selectmen, adding that without their help and that of the town planning and zoning boards, the conversion may not have happened.

"We have been at a number of these award ceremonies," he said, "but this was Sharon's achievement."

Attesting to the determination of the town government and the voters, Timilty was in awe of the fact that the project was at three town meetings and won unanimous support.

"I don't know many towns in Massachusetts, if any, where that would have happened even once," he added.

Earlier, Martin had gone over the history of the school, which was named after Charles Wilber, the only town resident to die in World War I.

"It started as a middle school in the 1930s and then became the high school for a while," he explained, "and then after its closure in the 1980 period it lay empty for some 30 years."

There were various plans presented to try and use the building but they all came to naught until this recent turnaround.

Chairman Joe Roach reminded the audience that the building had at one time been owned by a group who wanted to convert it for assisted living purposes but that too did not happen.

"Then the town bought the building back and we removed the asbestos and repaired the building enough to make it safe," he said.

There was talk at the time that we should demolish the building "and when [Town Administrator Ben Puritz] and I used to drive by, I used to say that I hoped the ball would not get it."

The other major historical subject that came before the board was a report from consultants on the state of Sharon's water supply and delivery systems. There were joined in the presentation mode by David Crosby, chairman of the Water Advisory Board.

Two representatives from consulting company Weston and Sampson of Peabody, Blake Martin and Barbara Cook, presented the overview of the proposed water master plan.

The report from the duo took a look at the history of how water is provided to the town and included an inventory of all equipment and a shopping list of repairs, replacement and future water supply possibilities.

Cook indicated that the bill over a 20-year span could be as much as \$27 million if everything the firm was suggesting was to take place.

"We have prioritized based on need," she told the board, "and we know that many of the 129 miles of water pipe in the system is more than 100 years old."

She showed the board a graphic representation of a cast iron pipe that had tuberculated. That got everyone's attention, of course, but what she was talking and the audience was seeing was a cast iron that had seen quite a bit of corrosion and therefore water flow was less than half the normal it should have been.

Talking about water pipes, the town had roughly 25 percent that were of this type and many, if not most, had been laid in the ground in the late 1800s through the 1930s. These were followed by 41 miles of asbestos cement pipes that were put in during the 1950s through the early 1970s leaving 61 miles of the pipe du jour, cement lined ductile iron of which there is around 61 miles and these were laid after 1935.

Her point was that some had gone well past their 100-year lifetime guarantee, "and this summer's burst pipes (notably on Billings Street) could be the start of more incidents."

Also on the agenda was possible replacement of the water tank on Moose Hill, which needs major masonry work done on its cap.

The list was quite extensive and the report should appear on the town's official website in the not too distant future.

Basically, what the consultants were saying that to keep up with all aspects of water supply equipment maintenance would involve an annual investment by the town, of around \$1.2 million.

Crosby did not necessarily agree that that sum of money was necessary but quoted figures close to that.

So, how to do it? He suggested increased water rates coupled with grants from state funds that are designed to encourage towns to upgrade their water infrastructure.

Roach said that discussion is for another day. Crosby indicated that some form of rate increase should be put in place for the summer of next year.

The selectmen indicated that they would be happy to sit down with water advisory board to further discuss the water master plan.

"We will come to your meetings," offered Chairman Roach. Any decision on higher water rates for next year would have to be made before April, all parties agreed.

During the presentation, Blake Martin encouraged the town to continue to conserve water.

"You have been very successful doing that, and I urge you to continue," he said.

He also mentioned that the town should look at water runoff and other means to replenish the town system, adding that the state was urging towns to do this across the state.

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