

RECEIVED

By Darlene Brady at 10:02 am, Feb 22, 2021



Board of Selectmen
Special Meeting

February 18, 2021
2:00 P.M.

Present: Jean Speck, Chris Garrity and Ed Matson.

Also, present: Darlene Brady, Debbie Devaux, Donna Hayes and Matt Starr.

Ms. Speck called the meeting to order at 2:02 p.m.

Ms. Speck started the meeting by stated the Board of Finance has made it clear the mill rate will stay flat this year.

Swift House:

Ms. Speck confirmed that everyone received a copy of the Swift House Task Force Report and Action Plan Recommendation (attached). Mr. Garrity clarified that the request for the Swift House 2021/2022 Fiscal Year Operating Budget is as follows:

- \$35,000 for the roof replacement
- \$ 6,500 split between the maintenance and repairs

Mr. Garrity stated the \$120,000 request will need to be approved by the town. Mr. Garrity confirmed that the Task Force did not factor in any expenses for the second floor of the Swift House. Ms. Speck stated she was not ready to take any action.

Mr. Garrity made a motion to accept the Swift House Task Force Report and Action Plan Recommendation and ask the members not to do any additional work. Ms. Speck seconded the motion and the motion carried.

Budget:

The Board of Selectmen agreed on the following:

- Obtain a complete budget document –
 - All department's requests included
 - Any increases flagged
 - Narrative/justification/proposal for any increase

Next meeting is Tuesday, February 23, 2021 at 2:30 p.m. and if needed Thursday, February 25, 2021 at 2:30 p.m.

Ms. Speck made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 2:30 p.m.


Joyce Kearns
Administrative Assistant

These are draft minutes and the Board of Selectmen at the subsequent meeting may make corrections. Please refer to subsequent meeting minutes for possible corrections and approval of these minutes.



BOARD OF SELECTMEN
Special Meeting
Thursday, February 18, 2021 @ 2:00 P.M.

Join Zoom Meeting: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88195933808>

Meeting ID: 881 9593 3808

One tap mobile: +16465588656,,88195933808# US (New York)

1. Call to order
2. Swift House
3. Budget
4. Adjourn

"An equal opportunity employer and service provider"

Swift House Task Force Report and Action Plan Recommendations

To

The Kent Board of Selectmen

February 2021

Introduction

The citizens of Kent take great pride in its reputation as a charming, quintessential New England town. It has been featured numerous times in *Yankee Magazine* as the go-to destination for a special fall foliage weekend, recommended by travel writers in *The New York Times* and other publications, and chosen in recent years as the site for *Gilmore Girls* reunions, due to its similarity in warmth and character to the New England town depicted in that popular television series.

Those accolades are based primarily on Kent's bucolic setting and its historic charm, as evidenced in large part by the period homes that populate our town center and northern Historic District. Among the houses of particular note as one arrives in Kent via its main easterly access is Swift House. While not definitively proven to be "The Oldest" house in Kent's Village Center, as legend would have it, it is unequivocally one of the oldest and most significant, dating back to the 18th century.

History of Swift House

In 1743, two Swift cousins, Jabez and Reuben, arrived in Kent from Sandwich, Massachusetts. They settled their big families on the "Great Plain" – the large flat area south of Flanders that includes our current downtown – and each played a major role in the beginnings of Kent. Reuben was one of the founding members of the Episcopal Church before his death in 1773, while Jabez was one of the wealthiest men in town, holding many important town offices before his death in 1767.

Searching the land records to determine which Swift owned what property and when is an ongoing challenge, and extremely complicated. But in general, Reuben and his descendants owned what was formerly known as the Bull House at 3 Maple Street, now home to the SWYFT restaurant, while Jabez and his children settled right across the street on the south side of Maple. There three of his early descendants built homes very near each other around 1790, judging by some of the architectural details. Exactly when those three houses were moved and joined to become what we now know as Swift House cannot be determined from the land records, but it was likely not long after they were built, again based on the materials and methods used in their joining.

In addition, another Swift-owned house once stood near the intersection of Rte 341 and Maple Street Extension. So it is clear that the very influential Swift family played a significant role in developing the “Great Plain” that eventually became the center of the Town of Kent.

Over many years and numerous owners, Reuben Swift’s house at 3 Maple Street has been completely altered inside, with significant changes to the exterior as well. By contrast, the importance of the Town-owned Swift House across the street is tied to an exterior and interior that have been relatively unchanged since the three buildings referred to above were joined together, with only a few minor interior alterations made in the twentieth century.

Ownership of the Jabez Swift property subsequently passed to the Eaton Family, which occupied Swift House and farmed the attached acres for most of the 19th century.*

By the early 1970’s Swift House had fallen into disrepair, and rumor had it that it would be sold for development and torn down. To prevent the loss of one of Kent’s oldest historic buildings, Miss Emily Hopson, a well-known local advocate of historic preservation and founder of the Kent Historical Society, made a generous offer that ultimately convinced the town to buy the property: if the Town would purchase the house and its surrounding farmland, thereby protecting it, she would personally pay for and supervise the clean-up and restoration of the Swift House and its immediate grounds.

Since the far-sighted acquisition of the Swift House property in 1973*, the Town of Kent has made abundant use of its purchase. Conveniently located in town, the more-or-less fourteen acres of land surrounding Swift House have been used by the Town for wide-ranging civic purposes, including a senior center & affordable senior housing, park & recreation facilities, the new town firehouse, our Veteran’s Memorial, and of course, Swift House itself.

*Note that some details, more specific dates, and exact acreage are not available as of this writing due to lack of access to Kent’s land records during the COVID pandemic’s closure of Town Hall.

Recent Uses of Swift House

Swift House has been operated as a multi-purpose public facility since its acquisition by the town, providing office, meeting, and event space for numerous organizations and individuals.

It was the home of the Kent Historical Society for many years, until that organization acquired a building to house its offices and collection storage that is more conveniently located directly adjacent to its 'Seven Hearths' house museum, in the Flanders Historic District north of town.

Meanwhile, the Kent Chamber of Commerce moved into Swift House and now occupies the former Historical Society office space. Its leadership sees multiple opportunities that feature the use of Swift House in its future, beyond serving as a starting point for its popular annual "Champagne Stroll", assuming that the interior space will be freshened up and made more functional.

Among other benefits to the community in non-COVID times, Swift House is not only been used as a convenient ad hoc meeting place for the working committees of various civic organizations, but also for local history presentations for Kent Center School students, and as an exhibition space. In addition, it serves as a place for members of the Kent Garden Club to gather and house their tools for tending to the monument plantings as one enters town via Route 7 or 341 and the plantings at Town Hall; to prepare for decking the town for the Christmas holidays; and to attend to Swift House's own gardens.

In the past, because of its historic charm and more intimate size than other local options like the Kent Community House and church halls, Swift House was seen as a unique and attractive rental choice for smaller events. As such, it was often used by local residents for personal events including small wedding receptions, rehearsal dinners, and to mark special anniversaries and birthdays, and could easily be used for those purposes again. Its more recent diminution of event use and attendant rental income to the Town has been due in part to the need for upgraded kitchen facilities and furnishings, but also to the fact that no Town efforts have taken place to advertise its availability on the Town website or elsewhere. Both of those conditions could easily be addressed without a great deal of effort or expense.

Task Force Need, Establishment, and Completed Improvements

Most of the other town facilities housed on the original Swift property have been well cared for through significant municipal funds allocated in Annual Town Budgets and Five-

Year Capital Plans. By contrast, Swift House has been run on an extremely tight budget with funds far from adequate to cover basic annual maintenance and repairs, and no accommodation for more costly capital improvements in recent memory.

Once COVID hit, Swift House was closed as a public health precaution. But in truth, its use by the public had already begun to diminish in inverse proportion to the increasing populations of squirrels, bats, and mice that had taken up residence in the attics, basement, and areas of the building with the least consistent use.

In short, Swift House smelled bad. It was clearly high time to do something about the interlopers that had had easy access through deteriorating soffits, sills, and mouldings that had not been patched nor painted for years, and through chimneys and stone foundations that had not seen remedial pointing for decades.

Thus, with much appreciation to Kent's Board of Selectmen, the Swift House Task Force was formed in the spring of 2020 to address the building's current and future needs, its charge being to:

- Assess and prioritize the current, mid-term, and long-term physical needs of Swift House
- Have supervisory responsibility over budgeted funding to undertake critically needed repairs
- Study options for the future use of Swift House and its surrounding area
- Formulate recommendations for a Swift House Action Plan to present to the Board of Selectmen

To address the most urgent needs of Swift House, modest discretionary funds were made available by the Selectmen, and Swift House's proposed annual budget for the 2020-21 budget year was increased through action of the Board of Finance.

Task Force members first met with three respected local contractors with restoration experience to and arrive at a consensus on identification of the building's most urgent physical needs. Reliable sub-contractors were then hired to do the work, including:

- Removal of all wildlife from the premises and clean-up of animal detritus
- Patching of access holes in wood trim and stone foundations to prevent animal re-entry
- Removal of two porous, original chimneys with missing bricks eaten through by squirrels, causing leaks into the building's interior, and replacement with temporary waterproofing, good for an estimated year, and
- Initial repair to the most vulnerable of the deteriorated window sashes and trim, with more to be repaired later.

Task Force Recommendations:

(A) Future Use of Swift House

As the most urgent repairs were completed, the Swift House Task Force's focus turned to considering options for future use of the building.

While we acknowledged that sale to an independent third party could always be an option for the Town, an easy and sufficiently profitable sale at this time would be unlikely. Its current condition would require substantial work for either commercial or residential use. Currently, there is also a surfeit of available commercial space in town that would make a commercial sale more difficult, while a residential sale would be impeded by its proximity to traffic and a busy gas station next door, and to the lack of an attractive, private yard for residential use, with the original yard now occupied by the former Ambulance Garage and Veterans' Memorial. Further, one must consider that if Swift House were to be sold, it would be impossible for the Town to replicate its available space for any future use within the Village Center at a cost remotely close to the cost of continuing to own and maintain it as a municipal asset.

So our primary focus turned to the issues and costs involved with providing for the building's potential ongoing use by the Town. After listening to input from a wide variety of past and potential users, we devoted our attention to preliminary studies of the changes that would need to be made in order to provide a more attractive, functional, ADA-compliant space for 21st century civic use, then sought professional advice regarding the estimated costs that would be involved.

Having completed those investigations, members of the Swift House Task Force have arrived at a unanimous recommendation for the Board of Selectmen's review and consideration:

That Swift House should be retained by the Town of Kent for public use

Our strong recommendation is being made for the following reasons:

- To save an important historic building in our Village Center that is one of only two 18th century houses open to the public in Kent, and is also of considerable value for its contribution to the character and historic charm of our small New England town. ...And once it's gone, it's gone forever.
- Because it is an attractive, well-built, and conveniently located facility that can continue to provide flexible, multi-use space for a variety of civic organizations and residents at reasonable cost for the present and foreseeable future, and could be converted for other municipal uses as needs might arise in the distant future.

The potential uses of Swift House are many and varied, including most of the past uses already mentioned.

With regard to the most immediate and frequent use, many of Kent's civic organizations that have used Swift House in the past for regular and occasional meetings and events

have expressed a strong interest in doing so in the future, once COVID prohibition ends and some further improvements to Swift House can be made.

Local caterers also report an absence of available rental space of a more intimate size that Swift House would offer, including interior and seasonal exterior possibilities. With some reasonable proposed improvements including a relocated new serving kitchen, Swift House could become a popular event space for organizations and individual use.

To supplement the Task Force's recommendation that the Town continue to maintain Swift House as a multi-use civic facility, we have included an itemized list of proposed interior improvements at the end of this report that would significantly enhance the functionality of the ground floor space for public use. However, it should also be noted that the upper floor of Swift House offers additional possibilities for consideration in the future as well.

Rented for many years as a residential apartment, the upper floor of Swift House currently includes a functional kitchen and 1&1/2 bathrooms. While it would require a separate exterior entrance and compliance with additional fire code regulations in addition to cosmetic changes, it could be made into an attractive, much needed, in-town apartment that would produce off-setting income for the Town once again.

Another less costly possibility for the upper floor in the short term might be to outfit it with desks and rent or offer it on a complementary basis as "Shared Work Space", with adjacent restroom(s) and kitchen for coffee and snacks, to people in need of wi-fi until broadband is available throughout the area, or for those seeking a quiet place to concentrate and work away from busy home life.

Task Force Recommendations:

(B) Immediate Swift House Needs & Costs

The most basic, indisputable need for Swift House is to increase its Annual Operating Budget by \$6,500 or more per year for repairs and maintenance, anticipating incremental adjustments for inflation as time goes by. That would allow repairs and repainting of window sashes, exterior trim, and other necessary repairs to continue and be scheduled on a timely basis in the future in order to avoid the kind of serious deterioration that becomes more costly to address if not attended to routinely.

To assist in that goal, the Town should also update its policies and procedures to make sure there are frequent in-person reviews of Swift House's current condition and approaching needs, with maintenance schedules established to address regular upkeep, and advance planning taking place for capital needs.

Immediate Recommended Increase to Annual Operating Budget: \$6,500+/year

The other immediate need is to replace one of the two chimneys that were removed last year, with only temporary waterproofing now in place, and at the same time attend to the overdue replacement of the Swift House roof. Because of the risk of water damage to the interior of the building, this work needs to be done in the forthcoming '21-'22 fiscal year.

It should be noted that a prior Town committee established to assess the status of all of Kent's municipal buildings in 2005 stated that the Swift House roof should be scheduled for replacement in 2009-10, when it would have been 25 years old. It is now almost 32 years old, and has yet to be replaced. According to two roofing specialists consulted, the existing asphalt roofing material is in extremely fragile condition and there is no time to waste.

In order to reduce the cost of the combined chimney/roofing project, the Task Force is recommending that the second, rearmost chimney that was removed last year not be replaced and that chimney hole closed permanently.

Estimated Cost for Replacement of Roof & One Chimney This Year: \$35,000•

- The above estimated cost is based on one quote from a recommended roofing contractor, only. Additional quotes may be higher or lower.

Task Force Recommendations:

(C) Swift House Improvements & Costs

In order for Swift House to become a useful hub of civic activity once again, it will need a few important improvements to make it more flexible, functional, and attractive for meetings and events of varying sizes, as well as for other types of activities. With that in mind, the Task Force has developed a proposed plan for consideration that would include the improvements listed below, along with estimated costs:

• Freshly painted interior walls and refinished floors -	\$ 25,000
• ADA compliant front entrance, handicapped parking space with curb cut if required, and additional yard work	\$ 12,000
• ADA compliant restroom in same location as existing 1st floor lavatory	\$ 15,000
• Hook-up to Town sewer	\$ 3,000
• Relocated and improved kitchen facilities for better access, and to provide basic necessities for use as a serving kitchen for events	\$ 20,000
• Flexible open plan between two large front rooms to allow each to be used separately, or opened up for larger events	\$ 25,000
• Improved heat in rearmost room to make usable in winter	\$ 5,000
• Furniture, furnishings, and tech improvements, including wi-fi throughout	<u>\$ 15,000</u>
Estimated Total	\$ 120,000

Timing of the proposed improvements will need to be discussed with the Board of Selectmen if they agree to the Task Force's primary recommendation: that the Town of Kent retain ownership of Swift House for use as a multi-purpose municipal facility.

To help cover some of the improvements outlined above, the Swift House Task Force has been investigating potential grant possibilities. Task Force members would be willing to work with the Town Administration to help seek supplementary sources of funding, or in other capacities needed to realize the recommendations made herein.

Respectfully submitted by the Swift House Task Force,

Zanne Charity, Chair
Chris Garrity
Marge Smith