



# TOWN OF ST. JOHNSBURY

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## ST. JOHNSBURY ARMORY REDEVELOPMENT PROJECT

### Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's)

July 30, 2021

#### **Why does the Town need a new police station and regional dispatch center?**

The Town's current police station, fire station and dispatch center located at 1187 Main Street is too small to meet the operational needs of all three departments and requires significant investment to address building code upgrades and deferred maintenance issues. The Town considered possibly renovating the building to house only a fire station or police/dispatch station but determined the building was not ideal for either operation. The cost of addressing structural and deferred maintenance issues and making the second floor ADA accessible would be extensive. Town officials ultimately concluded it would be most prudent to relocate the police department/dispatch center and fire station to new facilities and sell the 1187 Main Street property to a private developer.

#### **Why is the Armory on Main Street a good location for the police department and dispatch center?**

Renovating the historic Armory and keeping the police and dispatch station in a prominent downtown location makes sense for several reasons:

- Visibility – A prominent Main Street location will keep the police department front and center, which provides a feeling of security and serves as a deterrent to crime in our historic district.
- Proximity to Public Schools – A downtown location allows for fast response times to our schools.
- Central Location to Service Area – A downtown Main Street location provides an even response time to areas we serve.
- Removing a Town liability – The contaminated and blighted Armory is a Town liability. The Town tried on several occasions to convert the property into private beneficial use but was unsuccessful because of the cost to remediate environmental contamination. Remediating and renovating the building will eliminate this liability and put the building back into productive use.

## **Why not construct a new, lower-cost public safety building outside of downtown instead of renovating a blighted and environmentally contaminated historic building on Main Street?**

Based on recent cost estimates prepared by the Town, renovating the Armory building is expected to be about \$1.5 million more than the cost to purchase land and construct a new facility outside of downtown. This additional \$1.5 million is primarily due to the cost of remediating the environmental contamination in the building. The Town intends to obtain grant funding to pay for most of this \$1.5 million in additional cost, thereby keeping the taxpayer cost of the redevelopment project about equal to the cost of constructing a new building outside of downtown. The Town has already secured a \$500,000 environmental clean-up grant from the Environmental Protection Agency and is pursuing other grant opportunities to pay for all of the environmental clean-up and a portion of the building construction and equipment cost.

Additional benefits of renovating the Armory include:

- converting an existing vacant, dilapidated building to productive use
- preservation of a significant historic structure
- keeping the police station downtown
- contributing to the economic revitalization of St. Johnsbury's downtown historic district

## **Why not just demolish the Armory?**

Regardless of how the Armory Building is ultimately utilized, or demolished, the Armory will still require \$1.3 million of remediation before any further steps can be taken. By putting the Armory back into use as a viable long-term facility the \$1.3M will not be spent in vain, but will be another step forward in the revitalization of downtown St Johnsbury.

## **How much will it cost to renovate the Armory building, and what will be the cost to St. Johnsbury taxpayers? How will this impact my property taxes?**

The Town is asking the voters to bond the entire cost of the project (\$5.8 million) less the \$500,000 EPA Cleanup grant that the town received, or \$5.4 million. The Town expects to reduce the project cost by another \$800,000 by procuring additional state and federal grants, thus reducing the total project cost to \$4.6 million. Many funders, including the Community Development Block Grants, consider themselves last-gap funding sources, which means that a project needs to be bonded before their funding programs can consider an award.

When you add new savings from operational efficiency, Town Officials estimate property taxes to go up \$40/year on a home valued at \$150,000.

## **Should we be setting aside money in our reserves accounts to offset large-scale facility improvements in the future?**

Yes, we should be thinking down the road 20-30 years and preparing for significant capital expenses like these. Putting smaller amounts away annually extends the term for payment, thus reducing the annual cost burden of facility improvements to the taxpayer.

**What is the status of a regionalized fire department, and where would a regional fire station be located?**

The Town is working with neighboring communities to formulate a strategy to regionalize fire services. To date, several sites have been identified that could serve as home to a regional fire service. St. Johnsbury and surrounding communities will have to agree on a location and how to pay for a new regional fire station.

**When will a new fire station be built?**

We expect regionalization discussions to continue during 2021-22. Site acquisition and planning would take place in 2023 with expectations that a new facility would be constructed in 2024-25.

**What will happen to the existing police and fire station building at 1187 Main Street when the essential services leave the premises?**

Relocating the police/dispatch and fire departments to new facilities will allow the Town to sell the existing building at 1187 Main Street to a developer (private or non-profit) whose vision best serves the community. If the property is sold to a private developer or business, additional tax revenue will be generated for the Town. Several developers have expressed interest in purchasing and redeveloping the 1187 Main Street property.

**Why not renovate the Armory building and use it as a community center with a basketball court?**

The Armory was shuttered in 2009 because the cost to operate and maintain the building as a community center far exceeded any revenues that community programming could generate.

Many groups have come forward with ideas about revitalizing the Armory, but none could develop a financial model that showed how a community center could be financially sustainable.

Since 2009 community recreation programming has been organized through St. Johnsbury Academy's Recfit. Recfit provides a wide array of recreation programming for the community at a very low cost to the taxpayers. Although we acknowledge that more indoor recreation space would be great for our community, we believe renovating the Armory into a police department, and regional dispatch center is the most sensible and responsible path.

### **Why is the General Fund paying for the Armory Redevelopment project and not the Special Services District?**

The Town of St. Johnsbury will own the building and will pay for the redevelopment of the Armory through the general fund. Annual operating costs will be paid for by the PD and the Regional Dispatch Center.

### **How does the police department serve all residents of St. Johnsbury?**

- The town police provide protection and community service to schools that educate St. Johnsbury's entire population.
- The town police enforce town ordinances and state laws within the Special Services District. These laws and ordinances protect all residents who are employed, shop, own a business, recreate, dine, attend events, go to libraries, go to classes, etc., whether or not you live in the Special Services District or not.
- The town police act as backup outside the Special Services District for the State Police, and vice versa.
- The town police provide services to the Caledonia County Courthouse that serves residents of Caledonia County.
- The town police enforce parking ordinances whether you are a resident within the Special Services District or not.
- The town police provide enforcement at many events open to the public.
- The town police provide services to the homeless shelter outside of the Special Services District.
- The town police provide services to the Dept. of Corrections.
- The town police provide security to financial institutions who serve the greater St. Johnsbury population.
- The town police, in conjunction with the town dispatch staff, provide fingerprinting services for the region. This serves our school system, courts system, health services, and more.
- The town police provide emergency backup services to our local and regional health providers.