



TOWN OF ST. JOHNSBURY

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ST. JOHNSBURY ARMORY REDEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's)

September 6, 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 is the space for the new police and dispatch facility in the renovated Armory building larger than the existing facility at 1187 Main Street (13,100 square feet vs approx. 5,000 square feet)?

The existing footprint for police and dispatch at 1187 Main Street does not fully accommodate the needs of the department. The processing area is non-existent, there are no holding cells, no provisions for fitness/lockers, and the space dedicated to witness/suspect interviews is inadequate. Also, there is no sally port or vehicle storage—all substandard for a modern police department.

A new facility would also assist Town Officials with staff recruitment and retention, which is critical in a very competitive market for police officers.

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 for police and dispatch and building a separate fire station is expected to cost \$650 thousand more than the cost to build a new combined police, fire, dispatch facility and clean up and raze the Armory site.

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

How much will it cost to renovate the Armory building?

The Town is asking the voters to bond the entire cost of the project (\$5.9 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.

Why not demolish the Armory and build a new facility on the property?

There are several reasons why demolishing the historic Armory building and building new does not make sense:

- 1.) If the project used state or federal funding, it is highly unlikely that demolition of the entirety of this National Register-listed property would be permitted under historic preservation laws (22VSA14 for state, Section 106 of National Historic Preservation Act for federal). That includes the use of EPA cleanup funds.
- 2.) Cost estimates for the demolition of the Armory outweigh any savings that new construction would provide.
- 3.) Demolition of the historic Armory would remove an historic structure which is deemed important for our region in Vermont and within the historic Main Street corridor of St. Johnsbury.

What is the cost to the Town if the Armory building is not redeveloped into a police and dispatch center?

The Town would have to temporarily stabilize the structure and site, remediate the environmental contamination, and demolish the building (estimated at \$1.7 million minus the \$500 thousand EPA grant and other potential funding sources). Without a viable reuse plan, funding sources would be limited.

What funding is available if we do not build a police and dispatch facility at the Armory?

- The \$500 thousand cleanup grant from the EPA is available for environmental cleanup.
- The \$500 thousand Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) that the Town is working to secure is only available if there is a clear plan for redevelopment. CDBG funding is very competitive, and not having a community supported reuse plan in place with committed funding would make it very difficult to obtain this funding.
- Other funding sources include the USDA RD Community Facilities grants, Building and General Services (BGS) Community Facilities grants, and Preservation Trust grants. Typically, USDA RD, Preservation Trust, and BGS funding is not available for environmental remediation. If we had a viable reuse plan for the Armory we would review these resources to identify if components of the Armory redevelopment plan would qualify.

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. Although much work is to be done with neighboring communities, the Town of St. Johnsbury is working to identify sites 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?

Although the regionalization study does not address the building of a new fire department facility, the Town of St. Johnsbury is working to identify potential locations. Because of the existing conditions at the current facility, Town Officials believe that a new facility will be needed within the next three to five years.

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.

Can I request an absentee ballot for the bond vote?

Yes, you can go to the Town Clerk's Office between 8 am and 4 pm Monday – Friday and request an absentee ballot, or you can call (802) 748-3926 to have a ballot mailed to you. Please note that mail requests are only available through September 9, 2021, and walk-in requests only through September 13, 2021.