

People Are Asking

Will the Kendall Center ever be rebuilt?

It's been fifteen months since the April 9, 1999, fire that destroyed the Kendall Center for the Arts. The arts center is now homeless, evicted from its interim location in Watertown to make way for an assisted-living complex and so far unable to find another spot for its education programs. The studio artists have scattered.

Meanwhile, Belmont's senior citizens are still looking for a location for a permanent senior center. The town recently decided to spend \$25,000 to install air conditioning in the rented senior center at Our Lady of Mercy parish hall, despite the seniors' complaints about the limitations placed on their use of the building: a four o'clock closing time, restrictive stipulations in the lease, and no elevator to take them to the different levels of the center.

Both the seniors and those in the arts program hope to move to a permanent home, a new building on the site of the former Kendall School. The Center for the Arts had occupied the original one since 1982, when the town closed the former elementary school because of declining enrollment.

Now they'll have to wait at least until late September to learn more about their fates. The selectmen awarded a contract, at the end of May, to Bargmann, Hendrie & Archetype, Inc., a Boston architecture and planning firm, for a \$50,000 feasibility study of two possible uses of a new building: a multipurpose community center or a school. The firm is also to consider the feasibility of erecting a building for one use but convertible to the other.

Since the School Committee has announced that it doesn't want a new school building--at least not a duplicate of the old one--any consideration of a school is obviously linked to the insurance coverage. The town's fire insurance on the Kendall gave Belmont two options under which it could collect. If it chooses not to replace the building, it would receive the actual cash value of the original. Unfortunately, the actual cash value of the 85-year-old building was not great--about \$2 million.

If, however, the town chooses to replace the building with one of like kind and quality, it would collect full replacement value--potentially \$6 million or more. Exactly what "like kind and quality" means is one of the many issues in question. Does it mean a school?

"Most government buildings look like school buildings anyhow," said one knowledgeable observer. "Schools are the most expensive buildings to build [because they need cafeterias and double-height gyms]. That's why building a school is the smartest thing to do, even if we built it as a school for the short term."

Would the town collect \$6 million if it built a multipurpose community center? That's one of the key questions. Selectman Will Brownsberger says he favors a community center, "which would include both a senior center that seniors could call their own, space for the Youth Commission, for the arts, possibly the Waverley library, and possibly other uses." (The Waverley library is now located in the Waverley fire station, whose sale has been proposed.)

The other selectmen could not be reached for comment, but Selectman William P. Monahan has stated publicly that he'd prefer a school, because that would bring the most money.

Brownsberger believes that the choice between a school and a community center will have no material impact on the amount of the insurance reimbursement. "I think we should be deciding as a town what it is that we want to do on that site," he says.

Another critical issue is the timing. The insurance policy requires that the destroyed building be replaced within two years. Town officials keep hoping to find wiggle room in the definition of “replacement.” But some authorities say “replacement” means a building that has been completed and has been granted an occupancy permit. With only nine months left before the two years are up, it's unlikely that such a building will appear on time.

The town has asked for--but so far has not received--an extension. Experts say extensions are sometimes granted, though not often. Brownsberger remains optimistic. “I expect that we’ll be able to gain a full insurance settlement,” he said.

– Sue Bass