

Friends of Mechanics Hall

March 22, 2012

The first meeting of the Friends of Mechanics Hall was held on March 22, 2012 with sixteen participants.

Introduction and background information was provided by the Underutilized Town Asset Committee (UTAC), which had been charged with finding a resolution for Mechanics Hall among other town properties. Recognizing the tremendous value placed on Mechanics Hall by many residents, the UTAC strongly advocated for the formation of the Friends of Mechanics Hall.

The UTAC members have discussed, with the Select Board, the concept of an independent group taking full responsibility for Mechanics Hall. The Select Board agreed that this approach should be more effective than leaving the matter up to the Town. They might also be willing to relinquish ownership.

Various levels of commitment toward the building were considered and attendees agreed that restoring the building in stages, starting with exterior improvements, while exploring all possible means of funding is the ideal approach toward preserving Mechanics Hall. The Friends are hopeful that exterior improvements, specifically repainting the façade, will demonstrate our commitment and will elicit support from the community. Key to these efforts will be establishing a relationship with the Town and communicating closely with our Town Administrator.

Examples of four recent historic building renovation and reuse efforts in Framingham, Groton, New Salem and Sterling were presented. Each building, including the Hollis Street Firehouse, Groton Grange, New Academy Building and 1835 Town Hall, represented a unique approach toward renovation and assured members that we are not limited by a single path to preserving Mechanics Hall.

Members recognize that a well-defined goal for the future use of Mechanics Hall will become very important as the project progresses. Much of the work will require substantial fundraising and the Friends will likely need to become established as a non-profit organization. At this stage, however, members feel strongly that the intrinsic value of Mechanics Hall is reason enough to preserve it.

Ideas for support include:

- Utilize all possible sources of labor such as volunteer labor, local vocational high school programs, preservation carpentry schools and Worcester County Community Service Program.
- Consider partnering with an organization such as a local University or other institution willing to endow Mechanics Hall.
- Approach local home improvement stores for possible donations/materials.
- Request funds at Town Meeting (perhaps a designated sum over the course of a few years – the manner in which 250th anniversary funds were raised).

Next Steps:

- A grounds clean-up day at Mechanics Hall has been scheduled for Saturday, April 21st from 10 AM to 1 PM to clear brush, rake leaves, etc. Initial preparation will include site assessment, contact with Town Administrator John Lebeaux, notifying abutters and making arrangements for possible BBQ and publicity banner. Mark, Mickey, Karen and Ken agreed to take this responsibility.
- Further publicity efforts for the clean-up day will be pursued by Ken.
- Alex will continue gathering information from the towns listed above to learn from their experiences. Additional resources include associates from the James Barrett House and Orchard House in Concord, MA.
- Establish a website – Phil.
- Form subcommittees to better focus on specific aspects of the project.

The next meeting of the Friends will be held Thursday, April 19th at 7PM in the Town Hall Annex.