

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF THE UNION BUILDING?

Kick-off Workshop Results Summary

30+ Attendees

October 26, 2023

The “What is the Future of the Union Building” Kick-off workshop took place at Dunstable Town Hall at 6:00 pm, October 26, 2023 with an additional Hybrid Zoom option. The meeting was advertised via Nextdoor, Dunstable’s Facebook page, and the Neighbor to Neighbor newsletter. It was also promoted by the Dunstable Union Building Rehabilitation Committee. 32 attendees were counted, including facilitators, committee members, and members of the public attending in-person or via Zoom.

Presentation 1: Union Building, Past and Present

The first presentation was facilitated by Northern Middlesex Council of Governments (NMCOG) and introduced the Union Building and the planning process, including a brief overview of its history and current status. It was noted that the planning process is at an early stage, so although public input is valuable, it is only one component of the decision-making process. A public survey based on the kick-off will be released, and feasibility for preferred options will be studied. After the presentation, meeting attendees were invited to share their stories about the Union Building and their hopes for the site in small groups. Facilitators then reported on the groups:

History and Connection

- Many attendees had children that attended the Swallow Union school and took after-school programs in the school.
- “My dream home brought me here, small town living that isn’t really small town. Interested in community, fostering a sense of community in Dunstable. Things that bring Dunstable alive and bring people together, [I hope that I], too will participate in the community.”
- A PTO volunteer volunteered to bring the Union Building up at PTO meetings.
- “Interested in anything that brings her deeper to the community and connects her.”
- “[The school is] Standing over the town and keeping watch.”
- “I’m obsessed with this stunning building”
- Some attendees remembered when the school was used for 5th and 6th grade overflow.
- Some attendees attended regular school in the building in the 1950s.
- It was noted that some of the original desks are still in existence.

Hopes

- Community center in Groton as a model.
- Children’s programing, Dunstable Children’s Museum.
- Would be a wonderful place to have winter activities.
- There was a lot of interest in continuing school-aged children activities in the school

Presentation 2: Union Building, Future Possibilities

The second presentation was facilitated by Spencer Preservation Group (SPG) and reviewed the Union Building's floor plan and a report regarding the exterior restoration of the building. It also reviewed several case studies of similar buildings being re-used for diverse purposes. After the presentation, there was a brief Question and Answer session, then attendees brainstormed uses for the building, then voted on which uses they wished to discuss in more depth.

Questions and concerns voiced during Q&A or after the session included:

- How does existing school impact possible uses?
- How does the limited parking create additional constraints especially for some uses (such as senior center use or use for meetings)?
- What are state funding sources for housing and community facilities?
- Could the building be of more than one use?
- Senior Center space is a critical need as it is currently housed in the Library
- Could the basement be rented out as well if fixed up?
- What are accessibility needs?
- What is the cost to the town, both now and for ongoing maintenance? – This is a concern.
- What educational programming can take place in the Swallow School after the reorganization and what additional space is needed for children's' activities, public or nonprofit?

Because each of the four breakout groups led brainstorming and voting separately and used different methods to vote, each group's results are presented separately on the following pages.

Group 1

Idea	Number of Dots	Notes
Classroom – Historic - Museum	5	Winslow School Tyngsborough – preserve and restore, some alteration. – Source for historic materials
Artist Studios	4	Upstairs, 4 total - Temp. Hall, split room. \$9 – 25/sf. Control median. Maintenance? Management?
Community Meeting Space/Rental Space	4	
Historical Society	4	Store archives, display artifacts, office
Crash Pad for TA	1	
Mobile offices – share space		
Senior space		Lunch, bone builders, craft/arts table
Private office		

Group 2

Idea	Number of Dots	Notes
Restoration of Classroom	4	
Art and Performing Arts Workshop Space	3	
Multipurpose Area	2	Adult ed, speakers, other uses that are brainstormed here
Senior Center/Intergenerational Center	2	
Artist Studio	2	
Dunstable Museum	1	
Children/afterschool		
Meeting Space		Similar to Harmony Hall in Dracut, could be used for official town meetings and other meetings
Town Hall storage		
Pickleball		Half-joke, but athletic activities for seniors discussed
Theatre		

Group 3

Idea	Number of Dots	Notes
Historic Room/Museum	6	
Town Administration Space	4	
Maker space/craft	3	
Senior activities/youth activities	2	
Flexible rented space		
Bigger space for meetings		
Housing		

Group 4

Idea	Notes
Residential	
Community center or non profit space	
Space for the Town / residents	Exercise, community space
Upstairs rented as office space	
Retail space	that fits the character of the town
Small entrepreneurial / craft market	
Entrepreneurship for all in Lowell	Food related start ups
Restaurant in Dunstable would be great	Community kitchen, commercial grade kitchen with pop-up events
Coffeehouse vibe	Used books, board games, seniors and kids after school
Council on Aging idea is great as well	Misses Andover senior center
Concert series on the town green	
Indoor farmers market type place	
Anything to do with fitness	After school / council on aging, Karate / Tai Kwan Do, Dance Studio
Trade for something that's happening elsewhere in town that's in a less desirable location	
Cub scouts	If wanted to use the space at Swallow Union on a Saturday or Sunday, it's a \$500 fee.
Historic Society/Museum	
Mobile Office	
Community Meeting Space	
Artist space/maker space	

Conclusions

Although the opinions were diverse, no attendees voiced support for razing the building or selling it to the highest bidder. All felt that it was a critical piece of history and should be retained as a valuable asset in the Town Center.

There was perhaps the most excitement for uses that incorporated the history of the Union Building, such as a museum, a space for the Historical Society, or a recreation of one of the classrooms. There was also strong support for arts uses and community meeting uses. There was also a great deal of support for splitting uses and having private uses (art studios, office space, or other income-producing spaces) on the top floor and possibly basement, and a public use on the first floor. Notably, positive or negative feedback on residential uses or affordable housing was not discussed as much as community uses. That said, the public appeared to be flexible: there was a strong sentiment that whatever use contributed to the preservation of the building was acceptable, and that the Town should actively pursue funding sources for this purpose.

Finally, there are many competing needs in Dunstable. Meeting space when Town Hall spaces are full, senior center space, commercial kitchen, and public arts spaces were all voiced as a need. Some of these may be feasible for the Union Building, while others should be considered if future opportunities rise.