Town of Pittsford 1796

REPORT OF THE PITTSFORD TOWN BOARD ON RECOMMENDED ACTION FOR A COMMUNITY CENTER

July 20, 2016

1. Background

Pittsford's existing Spiegel Community Center is in need of repair or replacement of many critical components of its infrastructure, including the roof, heating system, elevator and other critical systems. Maintenance has been deferred for at least 15 years as the Town has grappled with the issue of how to proceed. Continued deferral is no longer an option if the Town is to continue using the building. Undertaking all maintenance necessary to fix or replace the aging systems would cost $6.1 million.

Making these repairs would do nothing to improve the appearance or condition of the building. Nor would it improve the current configuration of space within the building to provide greater efficiencies, greater security or better accommodation of recreation programs. Although fully sound structurally, the building presents a general shabbiness.

Before spending more than $6 million for the necessary repairs, the Town Board undertook in 2014 to evaluate potential options. It engaged architectural and engineering consultants, Passero Associates, to advise on options for improving Spiegel and options for building a new building to house a community center. The Board assembled a representative committee of citizens to consider options and advise. It actively solicited comments from Pittsford residents, most recently in three public meetings held for the purpose.

Given that there has been significant divergence of opinion among residents about the future direction for a community center in Pittsford, the Board adopted a set of Guiding Principles to inform its judgment as to any recommendation it would make. These are attached as an appendix to this report.

The work of our consultants, of the citizens' committee and of the Town Board yielded three options for the Board to consider. One was simply to do the necessary maintenance on the current building, but nothing more, at a cost of $6.1 million (Option 1). A second was to incur an additional $3.2 million in cost in order to undertake a full renovation and modernization of the current building and site, in addition to the necessary maintenance; the aggregate cost would be $9.3 million (Option 2). A third was to build a completely new facility at a site to be determined, with 20,000 square feet more than a renovated Spiegel Center, at a cost, inclusive of estimated cost of land acquisition, of $14.6 million (Option 3).

2. Conclusion and Recommendation

The Town Board recommends complete renovation of the Spiegel Community Center as the most cost-efficient and desirable means to provide an attractive and functional facility to accommodate our recreation programming in the years to come.

This approach offers a low impact means for a new community center inside an existing package, near the center of Pittsford, that does not take away existing green space within the Town and that can be accomplished sooner rather than later.

3. Analysis

We refer to the Guiding Principles attached to this report. Of the points enumerated, those that weigh most heavily in our decision are *cost*, *efficiency* and *programming goals* (respectively, items 1, 2 and 3 through 5 of the Guiding Principles).

a. ***Cost***

Pursuing Option 1 would result in all systems working reliably into the foreseeable future, inside a shabby building that retains all limitations of its current configuration of interior space. All current security issues related to building access would remain. Housing the Senior Center at Spiegel would be impractical, due to problems of space configuration and access. An expenditure of more than $6 million would result in functional improvement, but almost no visible improvement to the building.

Nevertheless, the systems repairs and replacements comprising that $6 million figure will need to be made, over the relatively near term of 5 to 8 years, merely in order to keep the current building open to continued public use. Consequently, if we do nothing (short of phasing out the community center altogether) we can expect to have to put that amount of money into the building and somewhat more, since the cost of things will increase over that 5 to 8 year period.

For additional expense that appears reasonable in the context of realistic alternatives, fully renovating Spiegel – for practical purposes, building a new community center within the shell of the existing building – would provide a fully functional and modernized facility of high aesthetic and architectural appeal. It would offer additional space for meetings and programs. It could house the Senior Center comfortably. It would provide the level of security and controlled access required in the modern era. At a cost of an additional $3.2 million over what we would need to pay for repairs, it would accomplish all of the goals the Board defined in its Guiding Principles for a community center fit to serve into the future.

Undertaking a full renovation of the Spiegel Community Center would cost the owner of a home of average assessed value in the Town $69 per year, for the next 15 years. The average assessed value of a house in Pittsford is $275,075.

Option 3, calling for a new building, would increase the cost of a new community center by half again as much as Option 2. It would impose additional expense over a full renovation of Spiegel nearly equal to the entire $6 million cost of the improvements to our athletic fields now under way. This would be spent on more community center than we need, in light of the programming goals stated in the Guiding Principles and discussed more fully below. Ongoing staffing and operating expenses for a new building contemplated by Option 3 would be measurably greater than they are now, or than they would be for a fully renovated Spiegel Center.

All but a handful of speakers at public meetings expressed the view that Pittsford needs a community center, not only as a venue for our programs but as a place to meet, both informally and for clubs, civic groups, music groups and the like. A small number of speakers at the public meetings urged an approach altogether different from the options presented. They suggested partnering with the YMCA and other institutions to use their space for presenting community programs currently resident at Spiegel.

There may be programs or categories of programs that lend themselves well to this approach. However, as an across-the-board solution we consider it impractical. Logistics of off-siting all of our recreation programs are daunting. Doing so would make the Town dependent on continuing cooperation of third parties in order to offer its recreation programs. Their needs and priorities for use of their own space would always take precedence over ours, short of specific contractual arrangements. Whether such contracts would be renewed would always be uncertain. Programs currently off-sited involve third party organizations with which the Town has long-established working relationships. This approach offers no improvement to the availability of public spaces in Pittsford for club and civic meetings. Instead, it would reduce substantially the availability of meeting sites in Pittsford, since we surely would sell the building if we decided to outsource all programming.

In general, we consider the full renovation of our existing facility to represent a reasonable middle ground between inevitable maintenance expenditure, as described in Option 1, and a new building. Two years ago voters approved the Town incurring $6 million in debt for athletic field improvements. Our incremental expenditure to improve Town recreation opportunities was incurred then. Given the Town's existing debt obligations not only for the fields, but for the library and the Greenprint properties, we consider it unwise to incur nearly as much as that incremental $6 million all over again by opting for a new building over improving the existing one. No one can say reasonably that Pittsford has not invested in recreation. We conclude that factors involving cost weigh heavily in favor of a full renovation and modernization of the existing building.

b. ***Efficiency***

The Board's inquiry into the future for a Town community center began with a structural engineering evaluation of the current building. Structurally it is completely sound and can be expected to stand for another hundred years at least.

Full renovation of Spiegel provides additional space for programming and for meeting rooms for use by community groups. The immediate opportunity it offers for greater efficiency is the ability to site the Senior Center in the renovated building. This would provide modern, attractive and spacious accommodation for our senior programs, an improvement over the current facility. A new building would provide the same, but at an additional cost of $5.3 million.

There have been questions about access, for participants in senior programs, into a renovated Spiegel building. The Senior Citizens' Center would reside on the first floor. The first floor is one-half level above the lobby level, which would be at grade. The proposal for renovating Spiegel provides three means of access from the lobby to the first floor: (1) an indoor stairway; (2) an indoor ramp and (3) a double-capacity elevator. This would represent a significant improvement over access to the current Senior Center at 3750 Monroe Avenue, which offers but two means of access: (1) an outdoor stairway and (2) an outdoor ramp, both exposed to the elements.

The concept plan for renovation calls for multi-function spaces, adaptable for meetings, performances, classes, dance and more. It permits multi-functional use of the gym, which is not possible now. These factors by themselves, together with relocating department offices to new office space in the renovation plan, open up more meeting and programming space in a rebuilt Spiegel building.

Merely undertaking all of the deferred maintenance at Spiegel accomplishes none of these objectives. Building a new facility accomplishes them less efficiently, given $5.3 million in additional cost for the building and materially increased operating and staffing costs for a new building.

c. ***Programming Goals***

A community center can become a bottomless money pit for a small municipality. There can be a temptation, over time or especially at the time of planning improvements or a new facility, of adding ever more to programming, physical infrastructure and the accompanying expense. Pittsford Town Board's inclination is quite different.

Our programming goals are modest. Described in detail in items 3 through 5 of the Guiding Principles, they may be summarized as follows. First, to carry on existing programs and provide for their reasonable growth. Secondly, to provide for natural evolution in program offerings while avoiding "empire building" in programming that adds substantially to capital expense and operating costs. Third, to carry forward our tradition in recreational offerings which, to a significant extent, avoids duplicating programs of similar quality and value easily available elsewhere.

Pittsford offers a popular schedule of recreational programs. It is a full schedule as well, comprising 32 pages in the Town's latest listing of programs. This is so in spite of the limitations imposed by the physical configuration of our current community center.

Should we be seeking to add many new programs to our list of offerings, some or even many of which might require substantial additional space that only a new building can supply? We think this is neither necessary, because of resources within the community otherwise available, nor desirable, because of additional cost to the taxpayer. We are a municipal government. We are not in the health and fitness business.

Pittsford is fortunate to have within its borders, or close by, an impressive selection of gyms, health clubs, golf clubs, the JCC, YMCAs and similar enterprises that offer a tremendous array of programming not available at the Town's community center. The communities most in need of a municipal center offering comprehensive recreational programming are communities that do not have such a range of choices and opportunities in the private sector. We, however, have them. Our municipal recreational offerings complement opportunities for recreation available in Pittsford from private providers. We do not seek to compete with the private providers. Our program offerings reflect this. As a Town government with a duty to its taxpayers, we should not seek to compete with them. Nor, for that matter, does the Town Board regard Pittsford as competing with other municipalities to see which has the biggest community center. Our goals in this regard are defined by our circumstances. These goals are modest. Over the years, this approach to programming has worked to the reasonable satisfaction of Town residents. We have struck a balance between what we offer and what we spend in order to offer it. We should seek to maintain that balance.

Can the Spiegel building support our program offerings? The answer must be "Yes," because we are providing those programs now, despite the current condition and configuration of the building. A fully renovated building will provide for continuity and additional space for reasonable evolution of programming over time. The proposed redesigning of programming space in Spiegel for full multipurpose use expands, further still, our ability to accommodate reasonable growth and change in programming.

It is for these reasons that, in the discussion above about cost, we have characterized the new-build option as "more community center than we need."

d. ***Other Factors***

These may be stated briefly.

(i) *Location.* We consider it desirable that renovating the current Spiegel building would keep the Community Center at a central point within the Town. This is important for its own sake. It is important in helping to maintain the vitality of the Village of Pittsford, which in turn contributes greatly to the quality of life of the entire Town.

At least as important is where it is *not* located. For twenty years and more, Pittsford's policy has been to use all reasonable means to preserve green space that contributes to the scenic landscape of the Town. Using the existing site spares one more parcel of open land within the Town from building. It represents the lowest-impact approach to siting the community center. In our evaluation of all the factors, that alone would not have precluded a new build. Rather, had our evaluation taken us to a

recommendation for a new building, it would have caused us to seek a parcel of land where a new building would be far less conspicuous than putting it down amid otherwise open countryside.

As a factor guiding our judgment, location has not carried the same determinative weight as the considerations of cost, efficiency and programming goals discussed above. Had those factors led us to choose a new building elsewhere, considerations of location would not have overcome it. We view the implication for location simply as a desirable consequence of choosing Option 2.

(ii) *Historic Preservation*. The same may be said for historic preservation as one of the values in our statement of principles. It would not have overcome a different decision driven by imperatives of cost, efficiency or programming. The opportunity to house our community center in a historic building of distinctive architectural appeal, rooted in Pittsford tradition, we view as a beneficial consequence of our primary determination.

(iii) *Timing*. Option 2 permits the most timely process. We may reasonably expect that seeking an appropriate parcel of land for a new building would take a year or longer. Using the current site allows the Town to proceed as promptly as possible.

e. ***Broad Public Support***

As we made clear at the community meetings, the Town Board has no illusions that everyone would have reached the conclusion that we have. Our intention has been to make a recommendation rooted in principles that everyone can respect, our goal to obtain for Pittsford's residents a solution that works best, at a reasonable cost we can afford.

The Town's survey of voters at the referendum in 2014 to approve funding for athletic fields disclosed that 76.5% supported renovating the existing community center.

The Town Board considers our recommendation to be a reasonable, moderate response to the need to do something about the community center after years of deferred maintenance. For the reasons discussed, we consider it worthy of broad public support.

We will schedule a referendum for later this year to obtain public approval of the cost of the project.

Respectfully submitted,

William A. Smith, Jr., Town Supervisor
Jared C. Lusk, Deputy Supervisor
Mary Gehl Doyle, Council Member
Katherine Bohne Munzinger, Council Member
Matthew J. O'Connor, Council Member

Guiding Principles

1. ***Cost***. Our recommendation must be affordable in the context of the practical alternatives and must deliver value for money that's plainly evident. The expense of a community center solution must be reasonable as well in the context of other public expenditure we can anticipate, such as sidewalks, for example, and in the context of public debt already taken on, such as for improving the Town's athletic fields.

2. ***Efficiency***. We want a useful facility that can serve the community for years to come. In addition, we should use the opportunity to reconfigure community center space, or to acquire new space, to save on costs such as rent. For example, incorporating our Senior Citizens' Program into the community center would save the Town over $100,000 in rent payments each year. For this reason it is highly likely that, whatever our recommendation, it will incorporate the Senior Center.

3. ***Continuity in Programs***. The solution proposed should allow us to carry on existing recreation programs and should allow for their reasonable growth. Our recommendation to the public must take into account changes to come, or potential changes, that we can foresee now. For example, if the School District were to adopt all-day kindergarten, the need for our "K-wrap" program would disappear, at least as it is offered now. Demographic projections also will inform our judgment.

4. ***Reasonable Goals.*** The Town offers a schedule of recreational programs that have proven popular with our residents. Over time, new programs begin and others fade out. Our community center should accommodate that natural evolution. We should avoid "empire building" that adds completely new and extensive programs that carry commensurately extensive additional costs both in capital investment and operation.

5. ***Avoiding Duplication***. To a significant extent, Pittsford's recreational offerings have avoided duplicating programs readily available in the private sector. We offer a lot that you can't quite find anywhere else, at least not conveniently. Our community center should not seek to duplicate what is available elsewhere at reasonable cost to the user. This approach follows on logically from the concept of keeping our focus substantially on continuity of current programs.

6. ***Location***. There's value in keeping Pittsford's community center in the Village, if practicable in light of other considerations. When the Town built its new library in 2004, it determined that the library's contribution to the vitality of the Village outweighed other factors affecting siting. Of course, it's possible that one or more of the other important considerations could outweigh this. As a Town Board our focus is on the welfare of the entire Town and its quality of life. Vitality of the Village at its center contributes materially to that quality of life. It represents one among the many other, town-wide, factors we consider in approaching the decisions that affect us all.

7. ***Historic Preservation***. Through action both private and public, the community of Pittsford traditionally has acted as a leader in historic preservation. The distinctive architecture of earlier eras plays a central role in creating a sense of place and defining the impression Pittsford makes on residents and visitors alike. Other communities around the country have made award-winning community centers out of older school buildings. There's value and even prestige in restoring a historic building and keeping it in public use. There are also grants available for this purpose that can help offset the cost to the Town, if we qualify. Again, one or more other considerations might outweigh this one, so it will not be a solely dispositive factor. But it's a factor.

8. ***Broad Public Support***. At least 15 years of experience teaches us that, inevitably, there will be profound differences of opinion within any group of people about what to do about a community center. We're at a point where we must make a decision. As a Town Board we seek to make a recommendation we reasonably believe can attract broad support from among our residents. Doing so includes making our best effort to hear all points of view, which is why we have slated a series of public meetings.

9. ***Formal Public Approval***. Unless we take the route of phasing out altogether a bricks-and-mortar community center, we can expect this to be a multi-million dollar project. We would fund it wholly or substantially through bonding, as we have done with our significant projects in the past, such as the library and, more recently, improvements to our athletic fields. In each case the Town government put the matter to a public referendum on the financing. We will do the same with funding for the community center if we seek to renovate or to move to a new building.

10. ***Timing.*** The engineering study we commissioned at the beginning of this process shows that the structure of our Spiegel Community Center is strong and sound. Yet major components of its infrastructure, including the heating, the elevator, the roof, the windows and other components need replacement. Without renovating the structure or moving to a new one, there's a real risk of having to close the current building, at least temporarily, if a major system fails or if such a failure were to create a risk to safety. So the time for decision is now.

Overall, our goal is to obtain for Pittsford's residents the solution that works best, at a reasonable cost we can afford.