

Hand delivered to the
Town office by Brent St'Clair
October 30, 2024

Why I am I involved

In 2021 I met with Mark Robinson to ask what I could do to help him in his struggle to reduce some of his workload. I picked Starling Hall from the three issues that were on his plate. I was not trying to stir up controversy, but instead was trying to get the townspeople to finally decide whether the hall was worth spending precious dollars to save. The issue has gone back and forth for three years. I feel this current effort of having a town wide secret ballot vote on a day that we can get the most people voting IS the way to finally decide this issue and give the Town Manager and Town Selectmen the final decision on what direction the taxpayers want to take with the hall.

A short history of public financing of the hall

The issue of Starling Hall officially began in 1986 when the town acquired the hall from the Grange, who did not want to upkeep the building anymore. The building basically stayed unused until 2015 when the Friends of Starling Hall (FOSH a non-profit) was created to support the renovations of the hall. The big push started in 2015 at our annual town meeting when residents voted not to sell the hall the vote was 42/22. A bond of \$100,000 was approved in 2019 with the understanding that FOSH agreed to pay off the bond from fundraiser events. The town has since reported that \$34,000 has been paid off, leaving a balance of \$66,000. In 2022 I initiated a citizen referendum to limit funding to maintain the hall to \$5,000 which passed (283/156). In the fall of 2022 the residents voted down (427/341) a bond to spend \$1,000,000 from a grant where taxpayers would pay \$500,000. In 2024 at the annual town meeting we voted to spend \$15,000 (73/62) to do a study of the hall. (The estimate to fix the hall on the first study was \$650,000)

According to the Kennebec Journal (8/22/24) the towns contributions to capital improvement adds up to \$65,900 since it bought the property in 1986. This is not accurate.

We really need to look at the TOTAL taxpayer contributions summarized thus:

\$30,920 for the yearly operation of the hall from 2017 to 2024 This includes money voted on while the hall was shut down with no heat, lights, or security system

\$39,357.00. The amount of money shown on Mark Robinson's handout dated 8/4/24. He called this taxpayer contribution towards rehabilitation and restoration (note he did not include maintenance dollars).

\$32,307.00 Money taken from hall reserve account and given to fosh in 2017.

Money spent by the town crew to develop the site and correct drainage
(We have not been provided this number)

At Least

Total is **\$102,584** This is surely more than the reported amount of \$55,000.

A short history of FOSH financing the Hall renovations but we have no recordings
FOSH has raised \$300,000 in grants and donations for the hall. We have not seen much detail on how this money was spent and looking at the building it is hard to know what has been done other than moving the building, with a new well, an entrance and foundation/basement.

FOSH reports in their annual 2023 financial report that they have reached the ½ way point which would be \$50,000 and also states the town has yet to appropriate any monetary support of the hall (both are not accurate based on the above)

Here are some of the expenses but I do not have a complete list nor do I have what some of the costs and who did the work.

2021-I believe the Hall was moved away from Rte 17. I know a well was drilled
And also an entrance was built on the front

2022 -A heating system was installed and will be paid off in 2024

2022- Bathroom was going to be installed and received a grant of \$8,000
but was delayed because of structural issues.

2023- Fire and security system reinstalled after the previous one was
disconnected to move building

2024- A facilitator was paid \$5,000 for four meeting during the first part of
2024. This was from a grant called Muddy Boots Foundation. I have found
no information where they are from or any contact information

I wish I could report on all the improvements along with a detailed list of how much each project cost. All I know is they have contributed \$340,000 in labor and material with a balance of \$41,141

My answers to taxpayers and my critics comments

1. The select board adopted a letter committing to renovating the historical building without the use of taxpayer dollar.

This commitment doesn't have any standing as it can be changed over night or a new board can do what they want.

2. FOSH felt we need more time to educate the public and not enough thought was put into the citizens referendum by Brent.

This has been going on now since 2017 and that has been more than enough time and I have put in a lot of time along with others

3. FOSH feels we need to wait for the engineering and architectural study.

This study will not change anybody's mind

4. We need a community center.

We have a school gym that is our community center and also have used the library and the fire station

5. John Beekman stated that secret ballots don't allow for public discussion

We have had four public hearing

6. FOSH reported they have had over 90 events this year

I would like to know what these events were and how much money they raised and were all of them insured? Also has the kitchen been inspected by the State of Maine for serving food.

7. We can't count all the votes and do a presidential election at the same time.

This one I found funny and I calculated that it would take less than an hour to count 900 votes with five teams of two This is called voter suppression.

8. The voting machines are too expensive

No comment

9. We might have to pay back over \$200,000.00 for some of the grants and

donations if we sell the hall according to Jed Davis

This one I will call scare tactics. If it were true someone would have already investigated this claim and provided an exact dollar amount.

10. The wording of the referendum is vague and doesn't say the board or town manager has to sell the hall.

It states "shall the citizen of Fayette request the select board and town manager to take all necessary action action to sell the hall". I think it is pretty clear

11. Starling Hall is the oldest grange in Maine.

According to Sarah Reed who compiled the 2010 Fayette Historical Society newsletter "Starling Hall was built in 1900. A dedication ball was held on February 16,1901". Liberty Hall, Machiasport, was opened in 1874.

12. If this vote passes we will do another citizen referendum to "save the hall"

This can be done but I would hope that getting **all** the town's residents to vote will end this once and for all instead of 120 people at the annual town meeting.

13. Andrew Sturtevant said we would need more time to sell the hall than the date of 12/31/25 as there are no comparable building listing like the Starling Hall. We also heard at one of the public hearings it would be too expensive for the new owner to do the required work.

IF you google grange halls sold you will find all kinds of grange halls that have sold over a few years including one right in Livermore. The prospective owner depending on usage would not need to do a fire escape or sprinkler system or even an elevator. These comments are proven to be false

14. The FOSH group will disband if the Hall is sold.

I think that FOSH has an opportunity to purchase the hall and keep their vision alive, The Town could sell the building to FOSH for one dollar, and let them assume the remaining dept. and then let them follow through with the Maine Preservation Foundation to find other funds to fix up the hall for FOSH purposes. They could reach out beyond the

town for support. I think it is time to sell the Hall, take an issue off the Select board and Town Manager's plate, and move on to more important issues facing our town. Should FOSH be allowed to use the building at no expense? So much time has been spent on this and I want to thank the supporters for all their help. I know that this is still a heated issue in town. My goal way back was to control the spending as I try to do on the budget committee and it worked for awhile until the first referendum was overridden by separate issue to vote on. Then I decided it was time to let all of the town's resident to have their chance to vote I found that when you are passionate about an issue you set yourself up for criticism. Let us all get out the vote and help bring the town back together.

Thank you,
Brent