

Fayette residents encouraged to rely on facts ahead of Starling Hall vote

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FAYETTE — As the Nov. 5 vote on the potential sale of Starling Hall approaches, vice chair selectman Michael Carlson is urging residents to base their decisions on factual information, including an upcoming engineering study, while emphasizing the town's commitment to preserving the historic building without the use of taxpayer funds.



An attempt to delay the Nov. 5 vote on the sale of Starling Hall was unsuccessful at the Sept. 3 Select Board meeting in Fayette. *Rebecca Richard/Franklin Journal*

Carlson is both vice chairman of the Select Board and acting president of Friends of Starling Hall [FOSH]. He is urging residents to focus on facts as they prepare to vote on the fate of Starling Hall in a referendum Nov. 5. The vote follows a petition asking the town to sell the building by the end of 2025.

“There are two sides in town,” Carlson said in a phone interview. “People who are passionately in favor of saving the building and people who are passionately opposed.”

Carlson, who also serves as the treasurer of FOSH, explained that the Board of Selectmen unanimously supports keeping Starling Hall and continuing its renovation. However, he acknowledged that some residents oppose the use of taxpayer money for the project.

“The biggest issue in town has been raised by a handful of people,” Carlson said. “They don’t want money from taxation to be spent on the building.” He said only a small amount of people are vocally opposing the effort to save Starling Hall, and added that they do not attend the public meetings.

“The Board of Selectmen has issued a public statement opposing the referendum question Nov. 5,” Carlson added. “We support keeping the building and its continued renovation, but using other sources such as grants and donations, not taxpayer dollars.”

Carlson emphasized that this position reflects a shift from previous FOSH leadership, which had advocated for taxpayer contributions.

“The previous president felt strongly that taxpayers needed to participate in paying for the renovation,” he said. “That’s the primary reason he resigned. I’m prepared to move forward and find different ways to pay for this.”

The town has already approved spending \$15,000 from surplus funds on an engineering study of Starling Hall. The study, which will assess what is needed to bring the building into compliance with public safety and accessibility standards, will not be completed before the Nov. 5 vote.

“We don’t really know what is going to be needed to bring the hall up into compliance so that it can be used as a public building,” Carlson explained. “The engineering study will be designed to answer those questions, but it won’t be completed by Nov. 5.”

The lack of a complete study has prompted some residents to call for a delay of the vote, but the Selectmen decided to proceed.

“It wasn’t a unanimous vote, but the majority of Selectmen chose not to delay the vote,” Carlson said.

He noted that even if voters approve the sale of Starling Hall, the building may not be sold immediately.

“The process, as I understand it, if the building is put up for sale, it will have to be put out to bid. People will submit offers that the Board of Selectmen will consider,” Carlson said. “The Board doesn’t actually have to accept any of the bids.”

Carlson also pointed out the potential consequences of selling Starling Hall, particularly for the town’s ability to provide public services in the event of an emergency.

“If something catastrophic happens, if the town office isn’t available or the library is unavailable, Starling Hall is really the only place in town that could absorb a loss of our current public buildings,” he said. “Selling it would put the town in an extremely difficult position.”

With one more public hearing scheduled before the vote, Carlson encouraged residents to stay informed and participate in the decision-making process.

“I would ask that they rely on facts and information that we can make available,” Carlson said. “Unfortunately, the social media discussions tend to be pretty much one-sided.”

Looking ahead, Carlson emphasized that the outcome of the Nov. 5 vote may not be the final say on the building’s future.

“The majority of the board felt that even with this vote, the issue isn’t going to disappear,” he said. “There will be opportunities for additional petitions to contradict the vote if the voters choose to sell the building.”

Despite the uncertainty, Carlson remains optimistic.

“I’m cautiously optimistic that the taxpayers will vote to keep the building, especially given that no taxpayer money is currently being allocated for its restoration,” he said. “I hope the taxpayers will continue to keep the building and allow FOSH and the town to pursue other sources so we can bring the building back to a condition that allows us to use it for public purposes.”

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