

The Herald

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East Valley Relic Ready for a Revival

E. Randolph Residents Seek to Re-open Community Hall

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BY CECILE SMITH



The East Valley Community Group and Randolph town government both hope to re-open the East Randolph Community Hall. (Herald / Tim Calabro)

Driving along Route 14 near its intersection with Route 66, travelers pass through the small village of East Randolph. At its core are the Middle Branch Market & Deli, a Baptist church, a small post office, and the

community hall—the faded focal point of the village the East Valley Community Group is working to revitalize.

Formed in 2018, the East Valley Community Group (EVCG) comprises

a dozen or so residents from the East Randolph area. The group also welcomes members from other nearby communities, co-chair Josie Carothers said.

The EVCG's main goal is to "build community," Carothers explained. Last year, the group hosted an ice cream social in order to help neighbors and acquaintances re-connect or meet for the first time. In the fall, plans for a pumpkin carving event were cancelled due to an early snow shower.

In addition to working to foster community spirit, EVCG's ultimate goal is to re-open the East Randolph Community Hall, a mid-19th-century building that, for years, hosted contra dances, concerts, wedding receptions, and other gatherings, said Carothers.

Closed Doors

In 2017, the community hall and lot were donated to the Town of Randolph by the East Randolph fire district, Carothers said.

According to Town Manager Adolfo Bailon, members of the Fire District "realized [the community hall] would be in better hands if donated to the town."

With this transfer, the East Randolph Community Hall became a public building—one that needs to comply with public building codes. Because the structure did not meet the criteria—and because the town has finite funds with which to make all the necessary repairs—the town closed the building shortly after acquiring it, Bailon explained.

In the past two fiscal years, Randolph budgeted more than \$52,000 to replace the septic system and install a ramp and ADA-compliant

bathrooms, according to a summary of the town's capital improvement program. Currently, the ramp is still not ADA-compliant, Bailon said.

A total of \$120,000 will be allocated to repairing a foundation leak and the clapboard in fiscal years 2022 and 2023, according to the report.

Although not quite in sync with each other, the town and the EVCG are both hoping to make the space accessible to the public once more.

"The goal is to get it open," Bailon said of the community hall.

"It's going to take a long time because, one, we're not just going to throw money at it just to get it open, and, two, we need to know what problems exist before we start fixing one problem," he added.

"Right now, we're going through the process of figuring out what is ailing this building," Bailon said.

The EVCG helped secure a grant to the town for a foundation inspection, which indicated serious work would be necessary.

Stop-gap fixes would range in the tens of thousands of dollars, while a full foundation reconstruction would cost more than \$100,000, Bailon said.

Still needed is an overall building assessment, for which the East Valley group plans to fundraise, Carothers said. Later, a planning grant will enable EVCG to hire a contractor, who will assist in sprucing up the interior, she noted.

In early March, the EVCG held a preliminary meeting with several

potential funders, such as the Vermont Agency of Commerce and Community Development Division for Historic Preservation, the Vermont Arts Council, and the USDA Office of Rural Development.

“It’s a really exciting project, and the [EVCG] has a lot of passion for it. They really started making some big steps over the past few months,” said Jenna Lapachinski, the Preservation Trust of Vermont field service representative who facilitated the grant organizations’ visit to East Randolph.

Putting all the potential grants together, she said, “you could be looking at over \$100,000 worth of grants pretty easily. ... They’ll be conditional on how the group ends up using the building.”

Combined, however, the potential funding agencies Lapachinski brought to East Randolph could only fund 20% of the total project, Carothers said, adding that the organizations “need to know that communities care enough to really do the job.”

A Point of Pride

The recent meeting with potential funding agencies started with a building tour “from the furnace room to the top of the bell tower, where the secret chimes live— which people nowadays don’t even know exist up there,” Carothers said.

The hall’s vintage 1930s stage curtain, complete with painted advertisements, is also a point of pride for the EVCG.

Over the course of several months, Carothers and other group members have been collecting the memories East Valley residents hold of the community hall, as well as their ideas for the space’s future

uses.

Respondents to a survey distributed at the Middle Branch Market wrote about their experiences at potluck dinners, a harvest gathering, a community fashion show, Christmas celebrations, and even a lobster festival.

Those residents also expressed their interest in hosting after-school programs, fitness classes, plays, dances, and farmers' markets at the community hall, the survey indicated.

The EVCG envisions the hall as a resource not just for East Randolph but for "all the Randolphs," Carothers said.

At the March 13 Randolph Selectboard meeting, Bailon suggested that the town aid the EVCG in forming an official committee, under the aegis of the town.

This development came as a surprise to EVCG member John Pimental, who presented to the selectboard on his group's work at the beginning of the meeting and left before discussion of the formation of a potential committee.

Regardless of whether such a committee comes into existence, the EVCG will continue to work towards its goals of village revitalization, Pimental told The Herald.

A recently-launched website (tinyurl.com/evcgwebsite) for the group includes a countdown until the next ice cream social, in mid- June.

Acknowledging that it will take multiple years to open the hall again, Carothers said that her group is "busy planning events to keep people aware that we're out here, starting to put together pleasant things for

us to do over here in the East Valley.”