

Town's plans for new fire station put on hold

by Charles S. Williams

North Wilkesboro commissioners reviewed preliminary cost figures for the town's new fire station Thursday night but stopped short of proceeding with plans until they could determine other facility needs in the town.

Keith Carlyon, a senior associate with the ADW Architects, estimated the total construction cost prior to the current economic downturn at \$3.6 million, and the cost in the current market at \$2.9 million but added, "the prices are creeping back up."

That price would cover only construction and no other "soft" costs such as furnishings and telephones, as well as surveying, site testing, and the architectural fees. Construction costs, in part, have decreased as contractors are looking for projects to stay busy.

Carlyon told the commissioners, "this design is for a building that will last. It's functional, and the design will fit in with historical structures in the town. You could build it for less, but the building would not be as durable."

The new station will be built in the "Block 46" area, which is the former American Drew property on the west side of the Central Business District loop.

The commissioners are touring town facilities today to determine the current and long-range needs for buildings and upkeep.

Carlyon said that he had already pared 3,000 square feet from the designs for the 15,000 square foot building.

Commissioner Debbie Ferguson commented that she had thought that the current fire station, on Ninth Street, would be abandoned by the firemen and occupied by another town department or sold until the board visited the facility for a meeting recently.

"I think we were all under that impression until we heard then that the current station might be used as a satellite station and storage," she said.

Carlyon commented, "We have identified several uses for that building. The department could certainly leave one truck there."

Fire Chief Niki Hamby said, "I think it would be a shame to sell that building and then realize that, 20 years down the road, we would need a satellite station. It would be nice to have it."

"Most of our citizens would feel safer if there was a truck stationed there."

Commissioner Bert Hall commented, "We want to have something we can be proud of, but we have to remember that we are in the middle of a recession, and we do have other facility needs. It's up to us to decide what the town can finance, and we need to give the town manager some guidance. The last thing we want to do is to raise taxes. But we need a new fire station."

"Somewhere, at some point, I remember hearing that this fire station would cost \$2.5 million."

"I heard that discussed, but there was never anything official said about it."

"Until we see the facility needs study," said Commissioner Jeffrey Elmore, "we don't really have a good grasp on what we need."

"We don't want the architect to design a building that we can't afford," said Hall.

When asked what type of building the town could build for \$2.5 million, Carlyon said, "it would be much smaller."

"Would it meet the needs of the town?" asked Mrs. Ferguson.

"No, it would be much smaller," said the architect. That would take away probably 40 percent of the square footage."

The board asked the architect to proceed with soil testing and the site survey but decided to delay further

discussion on the building and costs until the town's facility needs survey could be completed.

The commissioners tentatively agreed, pending formal agreement at the November board meeting, to continue to use BB&T for banking services. Town officials had asked for proposals from several other banks for the purpose of comparison.

Town Manager Hank Perkins told the board that the interest rates were extremely low, "so we're not making the money there that we used to. But the bank has agreed to cut the minimum amount of money we have to keep in the bank by half in order to avoid fees. Currently our charges are about \$1,000 a month."

The town also briefly discussed the downtown master plan and will consider approving it as a "map" for the future at the November meeting. The town can use any part of the plan but is not committed to following all of the steps. The plan includes the change to make Main Street in the downtown area a two-way street.

"I hope we can adopt it," said Mrs. Ferguson. "I feel as though I am the only person on this board who feels so passionately for a two-way Main Street but I am willing to let that go since there are so many other facets of this plan that we need to consider in the future."

"I'm passionate too (about two-way traffic) but in the other direction," said Commissioner Bart Hayes with a smile.

"This plan is important for the progression of the town," said Mrs. Ferguson.

The dates for both of the board meetings in November have been changed. The regular meeting will be moved from Tuesday, Nov. 2 to Thursday, Nov. 4 to avoid a conflict with election day, and the work session will be moved from Thursday, Nov. 25 (Thanksgiving Day) to Tuesday, Nov. 23.