

## Bates Observatory Summary – Selectmen’s Meeting December 4, 2012

### SLIDE #1

This presentation is an update on my offer in June to evaluate the activity relative to Bates Observatory since the date it opened in 1893. I have reviewed hundreds of documents and records maintained by the Town Clerk, Board of Selectmen and Water Department, newspaper articles, Historical Records, Town Reports and the Historical Commission documents of former members.

### SLIDE #2

You will recall the letter received from Edith Doane last spring regarding the disposition of her brother, George Doane’s, bequest to the town for the maintenance, restoration and upkeep of Bates Observatory. In that letter Ms. Doane suggested the town use that money where it could serve a more urgent need vs. sitting in an account unused.

The total was a little over \$90,000 and we are reaching the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary since we received the money without a plan to satisfy Mr. Doane’s wishes.

### **SLIDE #3**

The Bates Observatory was built during the construction of the Bell Hill Reservoir paid for by a \$1,000 gift from Theodore Bates for construction of the gatehouse (foundation) and the Observatory above. (Please note the value of the facility in today's dollars – this will prove useful later as we talk about restoration costs.)

The Observatory opened to the public in November 1893 with hundreds of visitors from surrounding towns taking in the magnificent view which was believed to be the best in Worcester County. A telescope and field glasses were provided and the town constables volunteered their services to assist visitors. In addition to reading the time of day on the clocks in New Braintree and Brookfield, visitors could recognize objects up to five miles away. As you can see, this is a view of how it used to appear if looking North from somewhere around the St. Joseph's church.

### **SLIDE #4**

The Observatory has been in need of attention as early as the mid-1940s when it was used for Civil Defense.

In 1985 support for the restoration was voted down at a town meeting in October.

### **SLIDE #5**

By 1997, with the impending construction of the new Water Treatment Facility, necessary attention to the Observatory arose once again.

In 1998, the Historical Commission attempted to get the Observatory placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In May 1999, the Town voted to pursue the listing. It appears that the effort was abandoned as there is no evidence that an application was ever submitted.

### **SLIDE #6**

The reservoir was backfilled in January 2000 by Graves Engineering during the Water Treatment Facility construction at Bell Hill. At that time, the Observatory was considered a hazard to public safety. The foundation was filled with tree stumps and road debris (as I recall) to keep it from collapsing within itself. In 2002, a fence was installed to secure the facility and prevent vandalism.

### **SLIDE #7**

In 2007, the Observatory was listed as a Scenic and Unique environment in the Town's Master Plan.

In 2008, it was listed as Priority #4 on the Heritage Landscape Inventory behind the 1) Downtown Development District, 2) Bates Farm Area and 3) the Coy's Brook Corridor. To date, I understand the Downtown Development District is the only priority receiving attention.

### **SLIDE #8**

Also in 2008, the Historical Commission energized its focus on developing a recreational environment on Bell Hill and sought bids from area construction firms to restore the Observatory. The Board of Selectmen requested clarification and a price cap on one of the bid estimates for \$63,000 (which excluded windows, doors, stairs, the catwalk, concrete and brickwork). The Historical Commission never followed up and the project was once again abandoned.

### SLIDE #9

To ensure transparency and thoughtful consideration, I would like to share the summaries I have prepared with the Water and Police Departments, Historical Commission and Historical Society (and any other interested groups) to receive input on a proposed future course of action and to help identify any further materials of relevance. However we decide to proceed, our evidence must be solid.

### SLIDE #10

Questions will be asked of these groups to confirm their recommendations to the following that will be shared later with our townspeople:

- 1) Is \$90,000 enough to restore and maintain the Observatory?  
  
If the facility is to be considered “open to the public” would this necessitate handicapped accessibility and accommodations? Is there a demand for such a facility? Would it be feasible to consider removing mature trees and adjusting the landscape to serve its intended purpose?
- 2) Who would be responsible for future maintenance and supervision? If we commit to the project, it is our duty to protect our investment.

- 3) Are there any alternatives that might serve as a measure to memorialize Mr. Doane's gift at Bell Hill or elsewhere? This question is tricky – posed by the Town Attorney following the receipt of Edith Doane's letter last year. For example, one town received a 100-year old building for use as a town library that was not only too small, but the town had already constructed a new one.

Approval was sought to use the old building as a museum, under the Historical Society, plus a few town offices. The Attorney General agreed to the new use as “relatively consistent with the donor's intent” and the Probate Court signed off.

It is conceivable that the Attorney General would not agree to use the funds for the Town House as a good compromise (as suggested by Edith Doane last spring), but it is worth exploring if a convincing argument/justification can be made that honors a form of Mr. Doane's original intent in this or another way.

- 4) Who would lead a proposed project? This would take leadership, ability, passion and commitment, whatever the outcome of the town's decision. If no-one volunteers to lead the project, or we cannot come up with a satisfactory plan, do we consider returning the money?

## SLIDE #11

With your endorsement I would like to contact the groups previously mentioned and invite the public at large to consolidate suggestions, considerations and commitment BEFORE bringing this up again for a vote by the town. I would think this can be accomplished by late spring or early summer next year, assuming winter assessments at the site may be impractical or impossible and I would suspect that to be a necessary component if, in fact, a commitment to proceed is suggested.

In addition to serving as the town's point of contact to coordinate feedback, I would also like to make the 15-page summary of discovery and this presentation available on the town's website for access by the public.

I believe with the re-plays for this meeting on LPAC 3-4 times each day over the next two weeks, in addition to providing materials on the town's web page, we will insure that all possible avenues have been explored to prepare a robust, thoughtful and complete assessment with everyone who wants to be involved in the loop.

Any questions or comments?