

Guest Column – Multi-use community center taking shape in Wells

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Imagine a bright, chilly winter's day and you're cutting across a smooth ice surface on an outdoor, covered rink in the center of Wells, laughing with family and friends. Imagine a sunny morning in July at the same place, browsing at the farmer's market, considering a variety of veggies for your family's evening meal. Imagine a friendly yet competitive pickleball match on that same surface. Or imagine proudly watching one of your kids performing at an event produced by one of the three schools located nearby.

The Friends of Wells Founders Park, a volunteer workgroup of Wells residents and town officials, have been working since January to bring those dreams to reality with the creation of a multi-use, year-round, outdoor covered pavilion. The Wells Founders Park Community Center, an idea long in the making, is beginning to take shape on the town-owned parcel of land on Route 109 between Wells Town Hall and Wells Elementary School.

The proposed center will share the parcel with the historic John Wells House. The center represents a significant step toward the establishment of a vibrant town center in an area that already includes town hall, three schools, the public library, and the York Hospital ambulatory medical facility, all linked by a sidewalk and served by a multitude of parking areas. The town's Public Safety Building and the Wells Activity Center are nearby.



The Friends of Wells Founders Park, a volunteer workgroup of Wells residents and town officials, have been working since January on a proposed year-round, outdoor covered pavilion, similar to Kennebunk's Waterhouse Center, above. *Dan King photo*

The structure itself will include a 120 by 200-foot concrete pad, including an 80 by 150-foot area that will serve as an ice-skating rink. There will be a roof covering the majority of the concrete pad and the structure will include bathrooms, a garage, and a utilities room. It will be open-sided with room outside the covered area for picnic tables. Parking is available at the town hall as well as the elementary school. As a year-round enterprise, uses envisioned includes skating, of course, but also pickle ball, the farmer's market, craft shows, concerts, and school activities, as well as being available for rental for private gatherings.

The work group, which is headed by selectmen Bob Foley and John MacLeod and includes Brenda Piecuch, Timothy Wheeler, Lilly Hager, Peter Hill, Jim Kanak, Danielle DeFelice, Ryan Liberty, Marc Cuthbertson, Michael Braniff, and David MacKenzie, is attempting to raise an initial \$2 million to fund the project, including \$1.7 million for the estimated cost of the building and the remainder for incidentals and to establish an endowment to fund annual maintenance costs. As mentioned earlier, the land is already owned by the town so there is no cost involved in obtaining the parcel.

A broad, grass-roots fundraising effort is planned, targeting local businesses, service organizations, foundations, and, most importantly, town residents. In-kind donations have been received and/or promised for the building design concept, clearing the land in preparation for building, receipt of building materials at cost, and organizing the fundraising and publicity effort.

An initial and immediate task is to educate voters about the need to rezone the parcel in question to general business from residential commercial, bringing it in line with neighboring parcels and allowing the project to obtain a waiver on building height that's necessary due to the slope of the roof that's needed, similar to the waiver granted for the public safety building. That will be a question that appears on the June town meeting ballot. It's important to note that the planning group is not a formal committee of the town, although the town will support the project by administering funds. Donations will be tax deductible and can be made to the town with a note designating the funds for the Wells Founders Park Community Center.

There is a plan to create a Facebook page in the future that will track the project's progress and also accept online donations. No donation is too small (or too large). Time is of the essence: the goal is to have the facility operating by the summer of 2025, an ambitious goal to be sure. More information will be forthcoming as the project proceeds.

Jim Kanak is a member of the Friends of Wells Founders Park. He can be reached at 207-289-4399.

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