

Truro's DPW Choice: A Single Building or a Sustainable Future

On Feb 5, 2025, the Ad Hoc Building Committee (AHBC), tasked with determining the best path forward for Truro's Department of Public Works (DPW) facility, met to review four options presented by Weston & Sampson (W&S). The core debate centered on the fundamental design: a single, consolidated building versus a campus-style approach with multiple structures. This \$32 million projected capital project represents the largest investment in Truro's history, exceeding even our annual operating budget, underscoring the significance of this decision for the town's future.

Despite compelling arguments favoring the flexibility and long-term benefits of a campus design (Options #2, #3, and #4), the committee narrowly voted 3-2 in favor of Option #1, a single building. This decision, seemingly straightforward, has far-reaching implications for the project's adaptability, cost-effectiveness, and financial sustainability, potentially jeopardizing Truro's ability to address its future infrastructure needs.

The Challenges of a Single, Consolidated Structure

Truro faced a hurdle in finding suitable land for its DPW. With the 340 RT6 site rejected by residents, the existing Town Hall Hill (THH) location remains the chosen and only viable option. However, constructing a single, large building at THH requires the complete demolition of the current DPW structures. This necessitates a complex and potentially costly relocation of all DPW operations, including the essential maintenance shop, to temporary facilities. The logistical and financial challenges of securing appropriate temporary space, moving equipment, and minimizing service disruptions have not been adequately addressed. Critically, the town *must* document and cost a viable temporary operations plan *before* proceeding with the single-building design.

Cost Considerations: Beyond the \$32 Million Price Tag

Construction costs on Cape Cod are notoriously inflated, driven by a limited number of bonded builders capable of handling large-scale projects like the proposed \$35.1 million DPW facility. This lack of competition inevitably leads to higher bids. A single, large building further restricts bidding options, exacerbating this problem.

A campus design offers significant financial advantages. Phased construction within a set time and known budget allows for smaller, more manageable projects, attracting a broader range of builders and fostering greater competition. For instance, bidding the administrative and employee facilities (the size of a single-family residence) separately could significantly reduce costs and provide opportunities for local contractors. This phased approach allows for more competitive bidding through multiple Requests for Quotes.

Modular construction offers another promising avenue for cost savings. A campus design is ideally suited for modular, off-site pre-manufactured construction, which can drastically reduce the square-foot cost by mitigating the "Cape Cod premium." Anecdotal evidence suggests potential cost reductions of 50% for the modular buildings themselves. Furthermore, site work, such as foundations and exterior finishes, can be subcontracted to local contractors, keeping some of the investment within the community.

Affordability: A Looming Fiscal Cliff

Truro homeowners already carry a substantial property tax burden. The proposed \$35 million DPW project, at a 4.5% interest rate, would add well over \$2 million to the town's annual debt service, increasing it from \$866,000 in FY25 to a staggering \$2.8+ million in FY26. This would push Truro's debt service as a percentage of the budget from 3.3% to 10%, a threshold many towns consider to be the limit of responsible fiscal management, leaving little to no capacity for other future critical projects.

These other projects are substantial and pressing Beach Point Wastewater, Walsh Property Development, harbor jetty repairs, Longnook Beach access improvements, the Truro Motor Inn, Pond Village water infrastructure, water tower proposals, Town Hall and Library renovations, PFAS mitigation, and decarbonization efforts – not to mention reacting to weather related events. These projected capital needs for these projects could easily be in \$30 and \$50 million over the next five years.

If no other funding source is available, the funding for these capital projects would come from debt. Truro's total debt could reach between \$60 and \$80 million combined with the DPW. This level of debt will necessitate significant tax increases, cuts to essential town services, limits other capital projects, or all of these. Truro urgently needs comprehensive ten-year financial projections to accurately assess the long-term financial, tax, and environmental impact of these projects to avert a potential fiscal crisis.

Price

The question of "price" needs clarification. The AHBC committee has been presented with four concept options, each with a different construction cost. While I trust these cost estimates and the committee's commitment to maximizing value, the critical issue is *affordability*. Voters have already rejected proposals over \$28 million. It seems "must-have" features like vehicle storage, a wash bay, and a single building are prioritized over affordability. But is affordability merely a "nice-to-have"? What happens when, inevitably, the next proposal, likely around \$35 million, is also rejected? Will we then finally address this disconnect? We face a choice: pursue a \$32 million project destined for failure or build the best DPW possible within a \$20 million budget, even if it means sacrificing some desired features. Compromise is essential.

In Closing: A Call for Strategic Project Management

As a software development project manager, I understand the complexities of managing and estimating large-scale projects. Breaking down complex problems into smaller, manageable tasks is fundamental to success. Identifying "critical path" items is equally essential. The temporary relocation of the Public Works operations, a critical town function, is now a critical path item that could jeopardize the feasibility of the single-building design at THH. A thorough site viability assessment and relocation plan should have been completed *before* advancing the single-building approach to the Schematic Design phase.

Effective project management also utilizes a work-breakdown structure, transforming large projects into more manageable "assembly" processes. This approach requires more upfront planning but ultimately reduces costs. Consider the construction of a NASA rocket: it's not built entirely in one location. Instead, components are manufactured elsewhere and then assembled. Why not apply this principle to the DPW? A campus approach, using prefabricated modules shipped to Truro during the off-season, could significantly simplify the process, lower costs, minimize disruption, and potentially accelerate the project. This modular, phased approach, enabled by a campus concept, warrants serious and immediate reconsideration, and should be advanced, at least in parallel with the single building concept.

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