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TOP STORY

## Westmoreland voters will once again consider a new fire station

By Molly Bolan Sentinel Staff  
Feb 25, 2022



Michael Petrovick, a Keene-based architect, explains how Westmoreland's proposed new fire station would meet the needs of a modern fire department.

Molly Bolan / Sentinel Staff

**WESTMORELAND** — After narrowly voting down a bond for a new fire station last year, residents will once again decide whether to approve funds that would pay for the modern facility's construction.

At a public information session Thursday night, about 40 people filled folding chairs and bleachers at the Westmoreland Elementary School gymnasium to learn more about the \$2,437,971 project.

That figure is about \$165,500 more than last year’s proposal, which fell short of the required three-fifths supermajority by just a handful of votes.



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At Thursday’s session, Deputy Fire Chief Graham Gitchell — who is also on the town’s Fire Department Advisory Committee — and Keene-based architect Michael Petrovick presented slideshows detailing the shortcomings of the current station and outlining the features of the new one.

In 2017, Scully Architects in Keene reported that it wouldn’t be financially feasible to try updating the current station, Gitchell said, which is why the department is pushing for a new one.

The proposed 6,500 square-foot station would be a single-story structure built behind where the current station sits, Petrovick said. The larger station would make it easier for trucks to pull in and out of the bays, provide areas for first responders to decontaminate themselves and their gear, and ensure greater security for the department’s equipment.

The current 3,650 square-foot station was built in 1954 and is right next to town hall on Route 63. The facility has reached the end of its useful life, and the space doesn’t meet the needs of a modern fire department, Gitchell said.

In addition to failing to meet current building-code requirements, the station presents a slew of safety concerns, Gitchell said. Its proximity to Route 63 presents a danger as trucks pull in and out of the bays, and the trucks hardly have enough room to squeeze into the bays. There’s also no decontamination area for first responders to clean and air out their gear properly, and first responders don’t have the ability to decontaminate themselves — that is, to shower and change — before heading home to their families.

There's also been a significant increase in the number of calls the department responds to, Gitchell said, and as those calls are "more varied and more intense," the department is expected to do more today than it was decades ago.

In 1990, the department responded to 23 calls, Gitchell said. In 2021, that figure was 235.



Last year, some residents expressed they didn't like the modern design of the proposed firehouse, Gitchell said. For illustrative purposes at Thursday's session, Petrovick also shared designs for a station that is more traditional in appearance with a gabled roof. But such a design would tack on an extra \$500,000, and wouldn't serve a purpose, he said. That is, in part, why the committee decided to move forward with the modern design.

Compared to last year's design, this year's has fewer windows and no glass vestibule area — cuts made to reduce costs, Gitchell said.

While the current proposal doesn't include solar panels, the roof would be structured in a way that would allow the town to pursue solar later if desired, Petrovick said.

Petrovick said he expected construction to last between six and eight months, and the old facility would need to be torn down before the new one can be built.

Gitchell said that the town is still working out a plan to navigate the limbo between one station's demolition and the new one's construction.

"It's imperative that it's done during summer months so that the trucks can sit in unheated areas," he said, "and we'll just have to find spaces."

To wrap up the evening, Tom Finnegan, chairman of the Fire Department Advisory Committee, shared closing remarks.

“From the beginning of this process, our goal was to have a cost-effective, efficient building,” he said. “We’re all taxpayers too — we don’t want to pay any more than we need to.”

More information about the proposed fire station can be found at [westmorelandnh.com/fire-station-committee-1](http://westmorelandnh.com/fire-station-committee-1).

Voters will have the final say at town meeting on March 9.

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Molly Bolan can be reached at 603-352-1234, extension 1436 or [mbolan@keenesentinel.com](mailto:mbolan@keenesentinel.com). Follow her on Twitter @BolanMolly.

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Molly Bolan