

# TOWN OF CHATHAM, MA

## SENIOR CENTER COMMUNITY FORUM

*SUMMARY FROM NOVEMBER 9, 2021*



NOVEMBER 22, 2021

Pierce-Coté

A REGAN  
COMMUNICATIONS  
COMPANY

## Background

In 2016, Chatham kicked-off a new senior center project with a study that found that the center was “too small, had inadequate parking, poor ventilation and an unwieldy three-story layout.” Over the next several years, there were meetings, a review of town land and buildings for a potential new site, options brought up by residents and advocacy groups formed to find the right combination of support for the location, size, and cost of a new senior center. Five years later the town is still without a new senior center. According to the Cape Cod Chronicle, at the June 2021 Town Meeting, the warrant article to build a new senior center at 1610 Main Street in Chatham, received a majority of the vote, but failed to achieve a two-thirds majority needed due to the financial request tied to the article.

## Objective of the Community Forum

The Chatham Select Board would like to restart a community discussion regarding the possibility of a new senior center. On November 9th, that process began with a facilitated community forum held in place of the Select Board meeting to solicit public input about a new senior center.

Here is an outline of the preparation for the Forum:

## The Process

- Pierce-Coté (PC) met Town Manager Jill Goldsmith, Select Board Chair Peter Cocolis, Select Board member Dean Nicastro and the Director of the Council on Aging, Mandi Speakman.
- Discussion centered on what information the Select Board, Town Manager and COA wanted to gather from the Chatham community. The group decided that to properly frame the discussion, there should be several questions to posed to the public to help guide the discussion.
- PC suggested that the best questions for the community forum would come from speaking to a cross-section of Chatham residents and the group agreed. The Town Manager’s office then created a list of twelve residents for PC to interview.
- PC contacted members of the list to discuss what information they would like to hear regarding a new senior center. The responses varied and helped create a list of five questions.
- In a follow-up meeting later that week, five draft questions were presented to the group as well as Barbara Segall of the Council on Aging for review. The

following five questions were approved:

### **Five Questions:**

- 1. Do you want a new Senior Center in Chatham? Why or why not?*
- 2. What were the lessons learned from the previous proposed Senior Center sites which were not approved? What can we do better this time?*
- 3. Where should a new Chatham Senior Center be located? What is your reasoning?*
- 4. What type of new programming and amenities would you like to see at the Senior Center?*
- 5. What else would you like us to know about the new Senior Center?*

### **Steps taken for maximum participation:**

To ensure that as many people as possible could participate in the November 9th community forum, multiple communication modes were offered:

- In-person public comment at the Town Annex during the forum.
- Virtual participation by video conference or phone during the forum.
- Using the Community Voice portal or submitting comments by a dedicated email: [communityforum@chatham-ma.gov](mailto:communityforum@chatham-ma.gov)
- A time limit of 3 minutes was set for public comment, whether in person or virtually. However, everyone was encouraged to comment on every question. The questions at the forum were asked and answered one at a time to keep the conversation focused on the topic and to aid with gathering information.
- Public comment via email remained open for several days after the forum and then closed at 5:00pm November 12th, 2021.
- For public outreach, PC drafted a press-release about the senior center, which included the five questions that would be asked at the forum. After approval by the Town Manager, it was distributed to print and broadcast media.
- In advance of November 9th, PC met with the Town IT team to discuss logistics of the forum including the agenda, the process of moderating comments from both in-person and virtual participants, as well as members of the public who would participate by the Community Portal or email.
- PC worked with Town IT team on November 8th, to rehearse and ensure a smooth-running session for November 9th, 2021.

## Post Community Forum Follow-up:

- The Town and Select Board requested two reports on the senior center community forum. One report would be a summary of the evening as organized by each question. The second report would consist of detailed comments by all participants, whether the comments were provided in person, virtually or the portals/emails.

## FIVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CHATHAM SENIOR CENTER

\*Please note that the following information is a summary of the recent Chatham Senior Center Community Forum held on November 9th, 2021. Each question asked at the forum was included and the bullets listed under each question are responses from the participants (some comments were lightly edited for spelling errors or to provide greater clarity).

### 1. Do you want a new senior center? Why or why not?

At the forum, the majority of Chatham residents who participated by either email, the community portal, virtually, or in-person want a new senior center, calling it “overdue,” and a “real need.” There were some who opposed a new senior center, citing that there were too many other “pressing issues” for the town to address.

Here is a synopsis of those who support or oppose the senior center:

#### *Support a New Senior Center:*

- Chatham’s population is significantly over age 65 and the existing center is inadequate for the needs of today’s seniors.
- Chatham needs an updated, accessible Senior Center. Our seniors have contributed so much to making Chatham special. Those who are living alone would welcome a place to socialize, exercise and learn.
- A new COA facility is long overdue as the existing facility has outlived its usefulness to serve the ever-increasing number of seniors that require services.
- The town needs a new senior center. The existing one has enough serious deficiencies and a poor layout, specifically with those load-bearing support columns in the media/ video room, lack of privacy and office space, as well as a tired, dilapidated, and depressing feeling throughout the building.
- A new center would be an asset to the town and would bring Chatham in-line with many other towns.
- We need a new building. There is no shortage of people who would use it, but

do not come to the COA as the building is bad.

- The current facility is inadequate – and should have been replaced 10, 20 years ago. Seniors have been waiting their turn.
- Yes, I do – socialization is important as we age, and we lose our family and friends.

### *Oppose a New Senior Center*

- The voters in this town voted it down and for good reason.
- At the town meeting the voters said “no.” Adhere to the results of the meeting. Focus on the real issues of the town such as drinking water.
- Currently there are more pressing issues that need addressing such as affordable attainable housing, coastal resiliency, and PFAS/water.
- With the ongoing cost of fixing our water wells, the best option is to fix up the current COA.
- Do not want a new senior center and neither do most people in town. It is too expensive, too big and is for a very small portion of citizens. I have not met one person over sixty-five that says they use it or would use it. A terrible waste of money. COAs for socializing are a fad.

## **2. What were the lessons learned from the previous senior center plans? – what can we do better?**

This two-pronged question allowed the public to critique past efforts and give advice on going forward. In terms of lessons to learn, many people cited the following reasons for the failure of the senior center town warrant article at the June 21st town meeting: poor attendance from seniors due to weather conditions and the choice of outside venue, poor communication or misinformation on the proposal, the water quality crisis, or the size, location, and cost of the project.

As for the advice on what to do better, the public offered that a more proactive public outreach approach is needed by the Select Board to educate the residents on the cost, size, and location and couple it with statistics and reasons why a future proposal is the best for the town. Also, they wanted the Select Board to be better prepared to handle critics as well as those who spread misinformation, and make sure to pick a time and location for town meeting that will allow the maximum attendance.

Here is a synopsis of the comments:

## Lessons Learned

### *Multiple Problems with Town Meeting*

- A significant number of people were not sure if the meeting was being held due to the weather and it was raining just minutes before the start of the meeting.
- The Town/COA needs to do a better job in scheduling the next town meeting to facilitate all the citizens of Chatham, especially senior citizens.
- Forced to make a choice between clean drinking water and a senior center.
- Senior center did not receive the votes at last summer's town meeting because the water well problem took front and center. It was textbook marketing: raise an issue like drinking water, discuss how expensive it will become, knowing 100% of residents agree and people made a choice, clean water or a new senior center.
- The town meeting was outside, and rain threatened, there is not a concerted effort to get out the vote; the failure was the weather, only 650 attended and seniors stayed home.
- They had a Town Meeting that was in a field and the weather threatened rain.
- There was the inevitable non-attendance particularly from the very population who would have benefited because of fear of weather and uneven outdoor space on Veteran's Field.

### *Misinformation*

- Lessons learned from 1610 Main Street (June 2021 town warrant proposal): Advocates did not understand the power of the negative history of the contributor of the land. There were downright lies about the placement and other misinformation such as who was paying for the positive ads, signs, and mailings.
- At the town meeting many speakers opposing the proposed COA gave misinformation and no one with knowledge of the facts responded. The Select Board who supported the project should have stated why they supported it and provided the facts.
- The Town/COA needs to do a better job in scheduling the next Town Meeting to facilitate all the citizens of Chatham, especially senior citizens. The Town/COA needs to do a better job in advocating for its decision and countering misinformation.
- The critics were not rebuffed and there was misinformation. How can it be too

costly if someone is donating the land?

### *Too expensive & too big*

- The previous design was over the top in terms of need and wants. It was too expensive.
- Clearly the taxpayers do not want a Taj Mahal erected at a cost of \$9 million. If more thought was given to the actual rather than purely potential uses, something smaller and more utilitarian might be achieved.
- There were many comments on the size and location which were ignored.
- Failures were location, size, and cost; the location was sketchy, size too large and the cost too much.
- Scaling down the size of the building to fit in with the existing elements of the Community Center should result in a lower price tag, which will appeal to taxpayers. For a town, the size of Chatham, a 9000-sf building is not warranted.

## **What we can do better**

### *Clearer communication backed by research*

- A more concentrated effort to communicate the reasons and justification (costs and location) must be undertaken by the Select Board months before the before Town Meeting so that misinformation and rumor can be minimized, and the facts understood by citizens.
- Designate a town employee whose full-time job is to coordinate and effectively communicate the decisions of the Select Board. You must decide as a Board how your decision making can lead to the desired result or else admit you cannot accomplish the goal.
- To make a recommendation for a new center to town meeting voters, get the best and brightest citizens and professionals to advise you. The Town has done an excellent job providing sewer in the town, which is more than a 40-year project, fully staffed with engineers and contractors. The Select Board should take the same approach with the design and construction for a new senior center. If you want to be successful, be strategic about the process. A new senior center will last forty to fifty years, so devote the same amount of time and resources that were devoted to the town sewer project.
- What was the usage of the senior center? Do some research to get a solid understanding of the usage of the center; this is a big investment, back up with

statistics.

- Use the 2017 town-wide survey about the senior center and use this as a basis for the need and design.

### **3. Where should a new Chatham Senior Center? What is your reasoning?**

It was clear that the majority of the participants want the Select Board to look at the community center as a possible location for a new senior center. The supporters claimed that merging the two centers would be cost effective, that the current community center space is underutilized, it is in a great “in town” location and it could be a place for shared intergenerational activity.

Those who oppose the community center as a location claim it was already ruled out in past senior center vetting, that seasonal traffic congestion on Main Street makes it difficult to access the community center, parking is insufficient and the open space at the community center is used for many activities during the summer season.

The second choice for the senior center was to renovate the COA at its current site. Additional options were purchase the Chatham Swim Club facility, locate near Eldridge Library and the Elementary School.

Here is a summary of public feedback:

#### ***Community Center – PROs***

- Love to see it at the community center. There are rooms there that COA could use plus in the afternoon there is a mix of ages which would be a win-win for both groups.
- The community center is woefully under-utilized, and many of its obvious attributes would meld with needs of seniors, such as the gym, the fitness room, and the aerobics room. Elevators are already in place.
- The community center can share facilities – already has bathrooms, an elevator, exercise room, gym, conference rooms.
- This location is closer to downtown.
- For cost containment, the only reasonable area is the community center.
- The community center can become a life center.
- Because of the expense of providing potable water – quality and quantity – that the only place that will pass a Town Meeting vote is the community center.
- The current COA is not adequate. But the one proposed in West Chatham was

too grandiose. The number of seniors currently utilizing the senior center is relatively small. There is a much larger cohort of seniors reaching their 60s+ who are much more active. They would be better served at a slightly expanded and reconfigured community center.

### **Community Center – CONs**

- In 2019 the community center was vetted and found not to be the proper location for the COA. There is a huge traffic problem in the summertime. Seniors are welcome at the community center but not as a permanent solution.
- Concerns with community center with traffic - it is very difficult, no place to park.
- Anywhere in Chatham except attached to the community center and the recreation area.
- Supported the site in West Chatham. It was free land, which is going to be developed no matter what. It was in a village center where access was easy—slow traffic, no need to make a left turn, on a bus route, abutting recreation areas.

### **Other Locations**

- Proposed that the town purchase the Chatham Swim club for use by senior citizens. Swimming is an exercise people who cannot otherwise walk well can do.
- A great location would be near Eldredge Library, which I imagine is visited by many seniors. It is a site that is central and familiar to most residents. Would also help in utilizing the programs and activities already offered by the library and bump their attendance.
- New senior center should be located exactly where the current one is. No need to spend millions on a new location and a new building.

## **4. What type of programs and amenities would you like to see at the senior center?**

There was a variety of suggestions to expand programming, offering a range of activities for seniors of all ages, especially younger seniors. Ideas for intergenerational activities were also recommended. The public also encouraged splitting up or combining activities with other venues across the town, including, but not limited to the community center, library, restaurants, outdoor venues, a community swimming pool, and the movie theater. There were very few comments

that said there were enough activities.

Here are some of the programs and amenities suggested at the community forum:

### *Variety of New Programming Ideas*

- Expand programming. Engage speakers on topics other than grieving, death, dying or cooking. Offer walking tours, Monomoy birdwatching or identification of native trees. Offer senior groups tours to local museums. Have Senior Day at the elementary school. Create an adopt a senior program. Someone with creativity at COA needs to be developing engaging programs for younger seniors.
- Combine programming and amenities with those at the community center. These two facilities should share programs.
- Maybe we can have a split senior center. The community center for sports and meetings and the senior center for other activities.
- Learn to make use of what we have. A fire station and a police station are requirements - an overpriced senior center is not a requirement. Combine programs with the community center and learn to work together and not independently of others.
- Lectures, movies, and presentations by many residents who have impressive backgrounds. Recruit volunteer high school students for one-on-one help with computer literacy and other multiple advances in technology.
- Cooking classes for men.
- Programming that represents the younger seniors. Nothing to do in Chatham at night. For example, the library is closed. Want to see programs and lectures. Pickleball was the only thing available. Would like to have book clubs. Past careers lectures. Pool.
- Dining excursions to Cape restaurants.
- Exercises classes such as yoga, tai chi, stretching, fitness.
- Book groups.
- Discussion groups.
- Swimming pool would be a great addition in Chatham for all ages.
- A town swimming pool could be part of this campus and would be used by all ages and enthusiastically welcomed by a large number of residents. A pool could offer lap swimming, water aerobics, water therapy, swim classes, and a practice area for the Monomoy school swim team.
- One major request that came out of the 365 Task Force was for a town pool.

If you want to see votes for a new senior center, particularly from those in the younger age categories, you will have to join it to something that they can buy into.

### *Against New Programming*

- None. They have more than enough programs. They can take advantage of other clubs in town for socialization. It should serve as an emergency warming and charging station for the entire community it must be a multipurpose building – not solely dedicated to seniors.
- Would leave programming to the management of the COA, the Friends, and the senior members. I do think the presence of the SHINE representative is a draw for seniors of all ages.

## **5. What else would you like us to know about the new senior center?**

The respondents to this question elaborated on a variety of ideas already presented in earlier questions. In addition, interesting new insights were offered to remind decisionmakers that “seniors are not a homogeneous group,” that regarding a senior center is identical to a council on aging has caused “frustration, confusion and controversy,” and suggesting that the parks and recreation department and school committee work with the council on aging to work jointly to plan a new intergenerational center.

- Must be an inviting and welcoming venue for senior attendees. Should accommodate those with mobility and hearing & related disabilities. Complimentary coffee, tea and water should be available. Also, offer complimentary transport by a minivan for the town residents since many seniors no longer drive.
- Wherever you put it, think big, think bold and think for the whole town when you are making the center otherwise it will never happen.
- If we are going to spend a lot of money on a center for seniors and the community, we should investigate the feasibility of a pool. Chatham kids need to know how to swim, whether for recreational or commercial boating. Seniors benefit a lot from aerobic exercises.
- One factor that has caused frustration, confusion and controversy has been equating/coupling a senior center and the council on aging. They are two separate entities with two separate functions.
  - The council on aging is a non-profit that receives local, state, and

federal funding and is tasked to provide in-home services, nutrition and wellness programs and transportation for residents 60 years of age or older who would be at risk for illness, disease, or accidents.

- On the other hand, many seniors, who are folks over fifty-five, are looking for physical and social activities.
- Seniors are not a homogeneous group. They range in ages and have a myriad of needs and interests. These may range from athletic activities, such as walking, biking, hiking, golf, pickleball, to artistic, musical, or literary or other interests. Seniors like other groups of people, are diverse in interests and needs. In other words, seniors need a facility much like any other community group and most of all, many seniors do not want to be isolated from the rest of the population.
- Allow the opportunity for the park and recreational department to be a part of the planning process for a new center. Allow collaboration between the council on aging board and the park and recreational department as well as the school committee on planning a new center that is intergenerational.
- The key to all of this is to find a location.

## Conclusion

The Senior Center Community Forum on November 9th, 2021 overwhelmingly highlighted that the public is supportive of a new senior center. In addition, it was clear that the participants who responded appeared to ask those in charge to think outside of the box when planning what a new senior center can be – should there be new facility, a shared facility, or a renovated facility? Should senior activities be better integrated with other town facilities that offer intergenerational participation? Is there or should there be a difference between a senior center and a council on aging?

The three big variables for a successful plan that would be supportive throughout the community would be to present the cost, location, and size of the new proposed center with sound reasoning and statistics to support the plan. Then there should be robust public outreach to educate voters and facilitate correct the record when misinformation is presented. Finally, the hope is that when the next town meeting is scheduled, it will be located at venue that is easier for seniors to navigate.

This forum did not constitute a scientific poll, but it did provide important public feedback that will help guide the Select Board and the Chatham Council on Aging regarding their next steps with moving forward on a senior center for the Town of Chatham.

SENIOR CENTER COMMUNITY FORUM  
*SUMMARY FROM NOVEMBER 9, 2021*