

Town Hall renovation bids on target at \$2.25 million

By **Caitlyn Kelleher**
JOURNAL REPORTER

Town Hall Building Committee members say they have enough money to accept the lowest bid for the building's renovation.

The committee met quickly and unofficially on Thursday, March 22, just over 24 hours after the project bids were accepted.

"This is just about where the bids had to come in," said Committee Chairman David Sargent.

M. O'Connor Contracting submitted the lowest base bid at \$2,247,700. The company's bid was also the lowest including the

two alternatives — a chiller for the ventilation system at \$89,000 and additional roof work at \$48,000.

The only other bid came in from Eastern General Contractors at \$2,310,000 with the two alternatives costing \$74,000 and \$38,000, respectively.

The state bid process requires alternatives be taken in order if they are used at all.

Voters approved \$2.729 million for the project in 2005 and within that sum the committee has to pay for the general bid, the architect, the project manager and other soft costs. Committee members also want

to keep a small contingency fund in case there are unforeseen problems with the renovation.

Town officials opened the bids on Wednesday, March 21. Sargent said at 12:55 p.m. there was only one bid, the one from Eastern General, and O'Connor's bid arrived minutes before the 1 p.m. deadline.

The committee wants to review the budget and ensure all of the requirements are met before issuing a letter of intent to work with O'Connor. The bids are good for 30 days after they are open, so the committee has until April 21 to make a decision.

O'Connor is a small company based in

West Roxbury.

The committee met with Kaffee Kang, the project's architect, on Tuesday, March 27, to discuss some of the project details. She told the committee O'Connor's recommendations were "better than average."

"They have been in the business for a long time," she said.

The committee has budgeted \$100,000 for the windows to be restored as a separate part of the project. The bids for that job have not been solicited yet.

Selectmen will review the committee's recommendation at their meeting on Monday, April 2.

Full-day kindergarten still a go if enrollment allows

By **Caitlyn Kelleher**
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The Ashburnham-Westminster Regional School Committee voted to continue tuition-based full-day kindergarten after a debate on the practicality and the philosophy of the program.

The tuition-based program was started in 2004 and is designed so that parents pay for the cost of half the day. The state mandates school districts offer half-day kindergarten for free.

"I've supported this over the last four years," School Committee Chairman David Christianson said.

But he said it doesn't look like the state is going to step up and help cover costs any time soon.

The tuition covers the expense of the extra hours for the teachers, the aid and the supplies. In that respect the committee voted to increase the tuition \$100 to cover what Business Administrator Sherry Kersey said was the true cost of the program. The tuition will be \$2,700 per student this year.

Students are chosen for the program

by lottery if more students apply than there are slots for. There was a waiting list for students at Meetinghouse Elementary School in Westminster in the spring, but by the time school started all of the students had been accepted off the list, said Meetinghouse Principal David Marble.

The full-day class was not filled at Briggs in Ashburnham this year.

"At what point is it too costly to run this program," asked School Committee Gwen Farely.

Christianson said it's the school committee's role to approve the program, but the administration must decide if it can support itself.

The committee also discussed the current kindergarten schedule. The district runs a kindergarten program where students attend for two full-days and one half-day.

"Is the 2.5 day program really the best we can do for our children," asked Dean Rios of Westminster.

Rios's son attended the preschool program at Meetinghouse Elementary School and his son has a special education plan that suggests the continuity of school five days a week would be beneficial. But he and his wife are concerned about the cost of the full-day program and the idea of sending their child to school for five full days.

"I haven't seen research that says two full days and a half day is better than five half days," said Jennifer Rios.

The two elementary

school principals said they don't have research, but noted teachers prefer the current schedule because it allows for more on-task time. The shift in schedule was made during the budget crunch a few years ago.

Christianson thanked the Rioses for coming and for raising the issues.

"Your concerns don't fall on deaf ears," he said.

School committee members whose children went through the current kindergarten schedule said they were surprised at how much they and their children enjoyed it.

Marble said he and Briggs Principal Candace Wright were sitting down with Special Education Director Alan Chates

to discuss the special education requirements and issues associated with consistency.

In other business:

- The committee voted to raise the price of school lunches as of April 23. The price will increase 25 cents for a student lunch, 50 cents for an adult lunch and 10 cents for a la carte items. The move is in reaction to a continuing deficit in the school lunch program.

- State Representatives Bob Rice and Lew Evangelidis attended the meeting and addressed issues from transportation reimbursement, to merit pay for teachers and the status of proposed alterations to state law.

Community Notes

Ashburnham Community Church to host Holy Week services

The Ashburnham Community Church invites the community to join them for any or all of their services during Holy Week — April 5 at 7 p.m. — Maundy Thursday Service; April 6 at 7 p.m. — Good Friday Service; April 8 - Easter Sunday: 6:30 a.m. Ecumenical Sunrise Service, on Meeting House Hill, 7 a.m. Breakfast, People's Church, 8:30 a.m. Contemporary Service with Praise Band, Community Church, and at 10:30 a.m. Traditional Service, Community Church. For information, call (978) 827-5553.

Forever Young Club announces upcoming trips

The Forever Young Club is sponsoring the following trips: On Wednesday, April 11, enjoy a day trip to the Mohegan Sun, in Uncasville, Conn. The Wilson Bus Lines departs from St. Anne's Church in Ashburnham at 7 a.m. and from the Mary Kane Building in Gardner at 7:15 a.m. Cost per person is \$24. Upon arrival each person will receive \$10 for food or free buffet and \$10 for a free bet (subject to change without notice). Departure from the casino will be 4 p.m.

On Sunday, April 22, enjoy a day of magic with "Le Grand David" and his own spectacular magic company at the Cabot Street Cinema Theatre in Beverly. The show features over 1,000 costumes, 700 entrances and exits, 100 classic illusions, 45 backdrops, 30 years in a small town, four hours of stage magic, and two antique theatres. It all adds up to one amazing show! Dinner will be available at 5:45 p.m. at Old Country Buffet. Cost per person is \$60. The Wilson Bus Lines departs at 1 p.m. from the J.R. Briggs Elementary School.

For more information, or to make reservations, call Mary Lajoie at (978) 827-4882.

The next meeting of the club is Monday, April 1, at 1 p.m. in the Senior Center. Tim Barrett will play and sing for entertainment.

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Ballroom

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8pm - 1am (Take Exit 1 off Route 3)

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