

History:

The one room Jerusalem Schoolhouse is located at 397 Jerusalem Road on a .52-acre lot directly behind the Jerusalem Corners Country Store. The Schoolhouse was constructed in 1874 to serve the students in the area and remained in service for this purpose until 1968. The Schoolhouse consists of a large open space, a slightly elevated stage area connected to the open space, and a small kitchen and bathroom. In the 1930s a small addition was added which currently holds the heating oil tank, the water system, a second abandoned bathroom, and unused storage space. While the Schoolhouse is still used for events such as exercise classes, birthdays, and educational events, due to the lack of insulation the water is turned off in the winter months and the space is only heated when used for short durations. The structure is also not ADA compliant, has several structural issues, and is in a general state of disrepair.

In the early 1970's the town recognized the need for a fire department substation in the South Starksboro area. Due to the response time from the main station or surrounding towns, homeowners were (and are) unable to obtain home insurance without the presence of a fire department apparatus in the area. A group of volunteers built a lean-to type garage structure attached to the side of the Jerusalem Schoolhouse and parked a tanker in it. This is Starksboro Fire Station #2. In the ensuing years the lack of a proper foundation has taken its toll and the concrete slab has sunken quite dramatically. When standing in the station you can see underneath the foundation of the attached Schoolhouse, and the sinking foundation is causing the structure to pull away from the Schoolhouse. Additionally, due to the lower grade, every time it rains the station fills up with several inches of mud and silt.

This property and the structures that sit on it are town owned. For many years, the Ladies Home Circle and the Friends of the Jerusalem Schoolhouse promoted use of the building and raised funds for much needed renovations. In 2017 the Selectboard decided that after years of deferred maintenance a plan needed to be devised to construct a new Fire Station and turn the Schoolhouse into a structure that was useable year-round and with ADA accessibility. The Jerusalem Community Center Committee (JCCC) was formed and first met in early 2018. It was charged with figuring out where and how to construct a new Fire Station, and how best to rehabilitate the historic Schoolhouse.

Process and Progress

The seven members of the Jerusalem Community Center Committee have met regularly over the past 8 years (with the exception of a hiatus during the COVID 19 pandemic) to discuss the best approach for constructing a new Fire Station and improving the historic Jerusalem Schoolhouse. By a vote of the Town in 2018 the Committee was provided \$25,000 and charged with planning the project and providing the Selectboard with architectural drawings of an approved plan. The JCCC started by commissioning engineering surveys, lot surveys, energy audits, and collecting other background information to inform decisions. All these reports can be found on the town website. The Committee also mailed a survey to all Starksboro residents and held a series of public meetings to understand what was important to town residents when considering what was needed in these facilities.

After much discussion it became clear that - while it would be a tight fit - locating a new fire station on the existing property was preferable. Not only is the land already owned by the town, but all necessary utilities are already in place. The JCCC contracted with GVV Architects to produce designs and drawings of the facilities. Many discussions were had with the architects to emphasize the feedback we received from the community and desired future uses of the structures. This included maintaining the historic structure of the schoolhouse, while also allowing for year-round use and ADA accessibility. Ultimately it was decided the historic Schoolhouse should be left mostly un-touched, and the 1930s addition be demolished to make way for a new - well insulated - addition which will house the bathrooms and kitchen, and allow the entire structure to become ADA compliant. Plans for the new Fire Station include two bays, providing for future expansion, but were otherwise kept to minimal fixtures and furnishings. The Zoning Administrator approved a permit for the Schoolhouse work in 2022 and the DRB approved the plans for the Fire Station in 2023. All of these drawings and plans can be found on the town website.

Funding

The Jerusalem Community Center Committee has received a number of estimates for the project through the years. Just prior to the Covid-19 pandemic the Committee received an estimate for \$750,000 for the entire project - Schoolhouse and Fire Station. An estimate from mid-2024 was for \$1.2 million. That number is expected to steadily rise over time with any number of outside forces affecting costs. Several different methods of construction were considered including awarding individual contracts, however between the inability to identify a local individual to serve as a general contractor, and the possibility of a significantly drawn-out timeframe, it appears more reasonable to award the project as a whole to a contractor.

A million dollars sounds expensive, and it is. However, it is important to know that there is not a lot being proposed here. The Fire Station is a basic garage structure with no improvements or amenities other than a State required bathroom and emergency shower. The proposal for the Schoolhouse is to remove the existing 1930s addition and build a new one with bathroom and kitchen. The new 24x30 addition will provide ADA accessibility, be well-insulated and heated for year-round use, while leaving the historic side of the schoolhouse generally as-is and only heated on an as-needed basis.

The project will utilize a large sum of ARPA funding as well as a large grant the town received for energy efficiency work at the site. Funds already raised by the Friends of the Jerusalem Schoolhouse will also be used. If the town approves funding for the project, the JCCC can and will also apply for historic preservation and ADA accessibility grants that are only available if the town can produce matching funds which - if awarded - will lower the overall cost to Starksboro taxpayers. The town has explored multiple funding options including loans through traditional lenders and has applied for a low interest USDA Community Facilities loan. The town continues to seek additional funding sources and has applied for Congressionally Directed Spending to cover the costs in part, or in whole.

Other work and possible uses

Some work has taken place at the site while waiting for a town-wide vote. In 2021 the roof of the Schoolhouse was replaced and the roof joists were strengthened. A small amount of ARPA funding was used in 2024 to replace the failing wastewater system. At present, the Town Energy Committee is working on identifying improvements that can be addressed with the use of a Municipal Energy Resilience Program grant that the town was awarded specifically for the Schoolhouse.

If the residents of Starksboro vote to fund this project, the possibilities for using the property are numerous. While Starksboro Fire Station #2 will have a very specific use, a new and updated station will mean the Town pays lower energy costs to heat the space and will ensure a longer duration for apparatus replacement saving money over the long term. A new facility will also ensure the Fire Department has a place to keep equipment within the high-density zoning district in South Starksboro. The Jerusalem Schoolhouse will have many possible uses once the proposed improvements are complete. With a large open area, a stage, storage, kitchen and facilities, the potential uses are endless. The Jerusalem Community Center Committee has heard from residents that they would like to see the space used for any number of public events, such as adult learning classes or lectures, craft or farmers markets, co-working hours, and regularly scheduled town meetings to name just a few. There are also a number of potential private events that individuals have expressed interest in holding at a renovated Schoolhouse such as book groups, birthday parties, baby/child play times, monthly potlucks and game nights, etc. Until updates to open the second floor of the library are complete, this will be the largest open municipal space in Starksboro. We look forward to what the property will be used for in the future!