by William F. Galvin

HARWICH — The future use of the old Harwich Middle School will be deliberated by voters at the annual town meeting in May. A petitioned article has been filed seeking $75,000 to study the best possible re-use of the former school, including recommendations for making it financially self-sufficient.

The former school building presently serves as the Harwich Cultural Center, providing studio space in 40 former classrooms, along with space for open public activities, education and recreational use.

Town meeting voters will see another warrant article seeking to hire a new fulltime director of cultural affairs for the town. The director would support the town's cultural council, serve as a point person for the cultural center, and oversee the artisan shacks. Town Administrator Joseph Powers said the cultural center activities are heavily driven by grants and the director would be charged with pursuing them.

Harwich has applied to the Massachusetts Cultural Council to have two cultural districts approved in the town, and expectations are that the designations will be granted this spring.

"This will reaffirm Harwich as a leader in cultural affairs, not just on the Cape, but throughout the commonwealth," Powers said when discussing the new director position with selectmen.

The petition does not seek to outright abolish the use of the cultural center in the former school. Petitioner Richard Gundersen said his goal is to obtain financial self-sufficiency for the town property. His proposal also requests the study to develop a comprehensive business plan specific to the cultural center use that provides detailed financial, organizational, staffing and marketing plans that make the cultural center option financially self-sustaining.

"Harwich has made significant effort to utilize this property as a cultural center and, as a result, warrants the cultural center to be included as one of the best use options for consideration," Gundersen wrote in his explanation accompanying the article. "The question is, can a cultural center be a financially viable and sustainable use of the former middle school property?" he wrote.

Gundersen said he would support the use of the building for a cultural center as a top priority if there is a way that the center can support itself financially. The center has a core group of supporters in town, he added.

But there is a large number of cultural groups and organizations in the surrounding communities on the Cape,
including five community theaters, he argued. Gundersen questioned whether these cultural activities saturate the market. He said it might be better if one of these long-standing non-profits which have demonstrated success, such as the Guild of Harwich Artists or the Harwich Junior Theatre, stepped in to oversee operations.

The petitioned article seeks the funds for an independent, professional study of the highest and best use of the former school. The article states town committees in the past have been unable to identify a use that is financially feasible, or that fully utilizes the facility and its grounds in a comprehensive and acceptable way.

"However, after six years of financial support from Harwich taxpayers, annual revenues from the cultural center business fail to cover expenses. The deficit total

A petition has been filed for a town meeting article that would authorize a financial sustainability study of the former Harwich Middle School building. CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO

for FY17 to FY 22 (partial year) is more than $588,000," Gundersen said.

The study would apply standard analysis methods to identify and rank optional uses for the school. The approach would include analyzing uses that are legally permissible, physically possible, maximally productive and financially feasible, he said. The consultant would conduct a market analysis to identify state, county, medical, educational, private employers and others who might be interested in purchasing or leasing the property, Gundersen said.

"I don’t think we need to hire a director of cultural affairs. We don’t need a full-time person to figure things out," Gundersen told The Chronicle. "We need a bonafide consultant to figure them out."

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