

Danforth reaches deal on new home

Selectmen back sale of town site

By Jaclyn Reiss
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In a unanimous vote met with thunderous applause last week, the Framingham Board of Selectmen said it will allow the Danforth Museum and School of Art to purchase the historic Jonathan Maynard Building on Vernon Street from the town for \$1 million in cash and \$500,000 in community services.

The museum's director, Katherine French, said the move will support the creation of a cultural district in the area surrounding the Framingham Centre green, which includes the Framingham History Center and is a short walk from Framingham State University, on the other side of Route 9.

The museum wants to move its exhibitions and art classes from its current downtown location, at 123 Union Ave., because the deteriorating building would be too expensive to renovate, according to Danforth leaders.

The sale, which requires final approval by Town Meeting in May, calls for the museum to put \$250,000 down at the closing, and pay off the remaining \$750,000 to the town through a 25-year mortgage.

Framingham would also be granted a 75-year right of first refusal if the museum wants to sell the building.

Under the agreement approved Tuesday, the museum will be required to provide Framingham residents with

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ROBERT HALPIN, *Framingham's town manager*

discounts on memberships and tours, as well as access to need-based scholarships for studio art classes. The museum must also continue to provide educational programs for Framingham schools, continue to work with adult English as a Second Language students, and provide other community-based programming.

The museum must also honor the town's lease with Framingham State, which rents second-floor space in the building. The university's three-year lease began last summer.

If the sale is approved by Town Meeting, the museum plans to start moving exhibitions and classes to the Maynard Building by this fall, and to relocate operations permanently by fall 2016.

The town assesses the Maynard Building's property value as \$1.3 million, down from \$1.6 million last year.

Danforth officials have also discussed constructing an addition to the building that would provide controlled lighting and humidity.

Museum officials said they are looking at conceptual drawings, and hope to complete the addition by the time the Danforth's move from downtown is

finished in 2016.

The Maynard Building had been vacant for years before the Danforth responded to a request for proposals put out by the town last year, outlining a plan to occupy the nearly century-old building in phases.

"It's a more adaptable space, and is really able to fit to our needs," French said.

The Framingham Centre location also provides ample parking and brings more foot traffic, she said.

"We feel we're doing a good job, and telling a good story, and the public is responding," she said at the meeting with selectmen.

The Danforth has seen a spike in class attendance and exhibition admissions in recent years. The museum has grown its operations by 8 percent since 2007, and membership has increased more than fivefold, from 700 individuals in 2005 — when French took the reins as director — to 3,700 as of last summer.

Town Manager Robert Halpin said that he thought the agreement made sense to both the museum and Framingham.

"From the town's perspective, this is a wonderful community reuse for a historical

building that was vacant for many years," he said. "There would be a significant cash payment, as well as in-kind benefits to residents, and also protection to the town."

Halpin also added that once the museum moves out of its downtown location, the Union Avenue space could be used for additional development opportunities.

Educational leaders also lauded the museum's move to buy the historic building.

Dale Hamel, Framingham State's executive vice president, said Danforth's move closer to the university will help foster a partnership between the two institutions.

"We believe if this moves forward, there will be more opportunities for collaboration, since the Danforth will be our neighbor," Hamel told selectmen Tuesday. "This building lends itself to a community purpose, and the use of that facility by Danforth would certainly achieve that."

Town resident Kurt Steinberg, executive vice president of the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston, said he has continued to bring his students to the Danforth over the years because of the shows the museum curates.

"The Danforth brings people via commuter rail to Framingham," Steinberg said. "I'm excited as a Framingham resident that, if this goes forward, this will be the last piece of the puzzle in creating an active cultural center."

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