

Confusion and controversy over management and upkeep of Horning's Mills Hall

Written By MARNI WALSH

Confusion over where the responsibility lies for the financial upkeep and management of Horning's Mills' Community Hall has led to controversy in Melancthon.

Frustrated and over-tasked board members and volunteers at the Hall are looking to Melancthon Council to step-up financial support for the Township's only functioning hall to ease their work-load and maintain the 1938 building, which they say is 'the heart' of 'community unity' in the rural township.

According to the voluntary Horning's Mills' Hall Board, the building was originally constructed by funds from the Horning's Mills Women's Institute. They say the Township purchased the Hall for \$1 from the Women's Institute in 1987 with the stipulation on the deed that it was to be used for public purposes, or ownership would revert back to the Women's Institute. The Hall Board says this was done with the intention of protecting the building from being sold, and that 'Melancthon Township is the sole deed holder.'

The current Horning's Mills' Hall Board members include: James Webster, Chair; Debbie Fawcett, Vice Chair; Lynn Hodgson, Secretary; Sarah Harrison, former long-standing Treasurer; Jennifer Weaver, member; Jocelyn Burke, member; and Jim Hill, member.

In recent years, the hardworking board 'has raised \$30,000 from functions, with the goal of having a small nest egg for bigger future upgrades or emergency repairs - a modest contingency on a large historic public building' says Chairman Webster. He states the operation cost for 'bare minimum utility funds' is approx \$5,000 per year.

He says, 'The Hall Board pushed to get all operating costs (\$5,000 or \$1.66 per Melancthon resident) to be covered by the Township ongoing, so the board could focus on fundraising for socially enriching community events and not be constantly fundraising just to keep the lights and heat on' - in what the board believes to be 'a Township owned building.'

Board member, Jennifer Weaver, who has enjoyed volunteering for the Hall, says many upgrades and improvements have been made in the past five years or so.

'The Hall Board has worked extremely hard, with a couple of members going above and beyond to make this happen,' she says. 'I would like Council to work with the Hall Board to keep the Hall doors open, starting with financial support to cover operating costs in order to take pressure off of the over-extended group of dedicated volunteers.'

Sarah Harrison, a member of the Hall Board for nearly 20 years, who has acted in a number of capacities, including Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer says it was with much regret she resigned as Treasurer last November. She told the Free Press, she was 'disillusioned with the confrontational manner with which successive Councils have approached the Board's requests, going back years, for a basic level of financial support for the Hall.' She says, 'It is as though the Township does not truly appreciate the level of love for and dedication to the Hall that the Board's volunteers, many of whom are also over-extended small business owners, have evidenced over the years.'

According to James Webster, the Hall received no funding from the Township in 2019, and in November of last year, Council requested a proposal for 2020 outlining: how the Board sees the Hall best functioning; Council's potential role; and an operating budget with a projection of needed future investments. This proposal was submitted in January 2020. Melancthon Mayor Darren White says Council reviewed the proposal 'and decided as a result to hold a public meeting to seek input from residents directly as to what they want the direction of the Hall to be in the future.'

Mr. Webster has expressed concern that the minutes from a subsequent Feb. 6 Council meeting stated that 'the Township doesn't

own the Hall.? He calls this 'confusing' and claims it contradicts earlier discussions.

Mayor White told the Free Press, 'Council has always in one form or another supported the Horning's Mills' Hall financially. The Township has never suggested we change that.' He says some 'felt that Council was attacking the Board and trying to get rid of the Hall.' But, he states, 'This is not the case.' He says, 'Once Council gets feedback, it feels it would be in a position to create a plan with funding etc for the future based on a needs assessment and resident 'wants.'

The Mayor says, 'Suggestions that the Township is 'reluctant' to offer funding are incorrect, as, we, at our last meeting passed a motion to provide funding in the budget.' Melancton Coun. Margaret Mercer, who put the motion forward to give the Hall Board \$5000 a year, says, 'We need to support the Hall and appreciate the amazing volunteers who are and have been dedicated to its operations.'

'Until we have the public meeting,' says Mayor White, 'I can't offer suggestions on solutions, but I'd like to see how we could better support all our local boards in Horning's Mills, as well as the boards that cover the rest of the communities in Melancton. I hope the public meeting will assist with that.'

James Webster says, 'The Hall Board volunteers hope the public comes out or writes in to Council for the upcoming public meeting on April 6, and expresses to Council what the Hall means to them, how lucky we are to have such a beautiful building to bring together our rural communities, and how essential it is to have a place to come together for both personal and community events.'

A public meeting on the future of Horning's Mills' Community Hall is scheduled for April 6 at 7 p.m. the Melancton Township Office.