



Warrant Article for Center at the Heights (CATH) Renovation Design Funding

Overview

May 2022 Annual Town Meeting appropriated \$75,000 for the Health & Human Services Department to conduct a comprehensive space utilization study of the Center at the Heights (CATH, Needham's senior center). Bargmann Hendrie + Archetype (BH+A) was retained to conduct the space utilization study, under the direction of the Permanent Public Building Committee (PPBC) with the Director of Building Design & Construction and the Director of Health & Human Services as the appointed project representatives.

Designed to provide recommendations for the best use of the building as it enters its second decade, the study built upon a 2020 review by the Gerontology Institute from the McCormack School at UMass Boston and an in-depth 2022 analysis of the CATH kitchen facility by design firm *Socotec Architects* and institutional kitchen experts at *ColburnGuyette Food Service Design*.

The 20,000 sf CATH facility was a revelation when it opened in early 2014, more than tripling the flood-prone space in the basement of the Stephen Palmer Building. Over time, however, the needs of Needham seniors have changed from what was initially envisioned when funding was first authorized for CATH in 2011. The much larger CATH facility allowed for the expansion of programming and services, yet there are multiple challenges to optimizing this space so that the CATH can accommodate the present needs of its clientele. Specific barriers cited by current users include:

- 1) Inconvenient parking;
- 2) Lack of a handicap-accessible entrance close to parking spots;
- 3) Not enough space for physical fitness programming; and
- 4) An underused kitchen and a roof deck.

Following an extensive engagement process which included key informant interviews, focus groups, and multiple presentations, along with extended consultation with the professional staff of the Council on Aging, the appointed members Council on Aging's board, and the members of the Permanent Public Building Committee, the final report presented seven cost-effective options, some of which could be implemented simultaneously for cost savings.

1. Conversion from Demonstration Kitchen to Production Kitchen;
2. Fitness Room Expansion;
3. Handicap-Accessible Vestibule/Rear Entrance;
4. Activate and Furnish the Roof Deck;
5. Conversion of Basement to Additional Program Space;
6. Create a Café Lounge to replace the current worn cafeteria space; and
7. Reconfigure space to provide more private offices for mental health clinicians seeing clients.

The capital budget request is to fund the design phase (FY 2026) for a project that combines options 1 (Kitchen), 2 (Fitness Room Expansion) and 3 (handicap-accessible entrance) at a Design Cost of \$395,000. Depending upon the design phase and its outcomes, this would be followed by construction funding request (FY 2027) at a projected Construction Cost of approximately \$1,705,000. This project would fall under the jurisdiction of the PPBC and Building Design & Construction.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

- *What is CATH?*

The CATH is the Center at the Heights, the location of almost all of the programming and services offered to Needham's senior population. Located adjacent to the MBTA's Needham Heights Parking Lot, it is a facility with approximately 20,000 square feet of space which includes a kitchen and café, a fitness room, game and art rooms, a wide range of program spaces, offices, and a lovely roof deck.

- *Why is there a capital request?*

CATH is now more than a decade old, and some of the planning assumptions that were made in the years preceding its construction have not reflected reality once patrons started utilizing CATH and its programs and services on a daily basis. The

[Feasibility Study](#) conducted over the course of FY2023 identified, through extensive conversations with patrons, staff members, and the Council on Aging Board, a number of areas where relatively small renovations would enable the building and its staff to meet the needs of seniors over the next decade.

- *How much money is needed for this Design study?*

Cost estimates provided as part of the Feasibility Study in FY2023 identified the need for \$395,000 to support design work on the top three priorities which were identified by the Council on Aging Board with input from the professional staff.

- What are the top three priorities identified by the Council on Aging Board?

The Feasibility Study identified seven “bite-sized” renovation projects that would enable CATH to continue to meet the needs of seniors in the decade ahead. The Council on Aging Board prioritized those seven projects, and the top three were...

1. Kitchen Renovation;
2. Fitness Room Expansion; and
3. Vestibule Addition and Accessible Parking

- Why does the Fitness Room need to expand?

The Fitness Room at CATH functions much like a gym where strength training equipment, cardio machines, stretching areas, and free weights are available for use. At all times, the Fitness Room is monitored by an in-person Trainer who is professionally certified.

The need for expansion of the Fitness Room is a good problem to have; the lack of space was initially identified during a pre-COVID [planning study by the Gerontology Institute at UMass Boston in 2020](#). It reflects the high level of usage by Needham’s seniors, a level that has consistently exceeded the projections made when the CATH was originally designed and built. But that high level of usage has led to some administrative steps – assigning workout time slots, limiting the amount of time that a person may workout – to reduce crowding. For a more permanent solution and to accommodate the level of interest in physical fitness from Needham’s seniors, a larger space is needed.

The Fitness Room project would involve a swap of the Fitness and Game Rooms at CATH, increasing the space for Fitness by 30%. The space available for games (billiards, table tennis, etc.) would be reduced but the new space would be refreshed and more welcoming than the current setup.

- Why is there a need for a Vestibule and more accessible parking?

CATH currently has a single handicap-accessible entrance (the front door) at a location which is the furthest possible point from the handicap-accessible parking spaces. The back and side entrances are NOT handicap-accessible. This project would support the design of a new accessible rear entrance to the CATH in close proximity to the handicap-accessible parking spaces, along with recommendations for appropriate re-striping of the parking lot and new curb cuts where needed.

The Town has also recently entered into a contract with the MBTA to lease 13 parking spaces in the MBTA Needham Heights parking lot (the 13 spaces in closest proximity to Hillside Avenue). Those spaces, which are restricted solely to patrons and staff of the CATH, will be re-striped to include a pair of handicap-accessible parking spaces and 10 regular spaces.

- Why embark upon a Kitchen renovation?

The Town of Needham Health & Human Services Department currently partners with both Springwell and Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital-Needham to provide fresh and nutritious meals for Needham's seniors and the town's homebound and disabled residents. These two programs operate out of different spaces. Springwell's meals are produced in Waltham, flash frozen, and then re-heated and served out of the CATH Kitchen. The Traveling Meals Program currently operates out of BID-Needham hospital's commercial kitchen, but it is anticipated this space may not be available long-term due to hospital expansion and space constraints. Therefore, planning for an alternate production kitchen space needs to be conducted to continue this important program for seniors.

The existing kitchen at CATH is designed as a lay kitchen, intended for use by volunteers and used for light cooking and teaching. It was not designed as a commercial kitchen, capable of large-scale meal production. Needham's Health & Human Services Department engaged [Socotec Architects to study the requirements and costs associated with converting the lay kitchen to a commercial kitchen in 2022](#). In 2023, BH+A assisted by providing a peer review and helping with value engineering. The end result is a [preliminary feasibility design](#) for an enhanced kitchen capable of producing 225 meals per day, which would support senior breakfast and lunch programs as well as the Traveling Meals program (meal deliveries for disabled or homebound residents) and still have room for growth.

The funding in this Warrant Article would support the design of that production kitchen, enabling it to provide healthy, well-balanced meals for seniors and equipping the town with capability of addressing the growing food insecurity of the

Town's senior residents. (Statewide data shows that 10% of adults ages 60-69 are food insecure, and regional data shows that the MetroWest region has a rate that is nearly as high)