

# REDDING SENTINEL



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## Be Foundation looks to secure public-private funding as plans take shape for new arts and culture center in Georgetown

By Jessie Wright

Following its purchase of the historic “Granite Church” at 5 North Main Street in Georgetown, the Redding-based Be Foundation is now pursuing multiple sources of both public and private funding to renovate the building to create an arts and cultural center for the community.

Among those efforts is a pending proposal to the Town’s ARPA Funds Working Group to allocate \$250,000 of American Rescue Plan Act funds to the project, to be matched at a 9:1 ratio by a Be Foundation investment of \$2,340,000. The proposal also requests a separate \$100,000 investment from the Town of Redding as a public-private partnership to help ensure financial sustainability in subsequent years.

The Foundation is concurrently exploring and applying for several state-level grant programs in historic preservation, arts and culture, and economic development. “The state grants all require matching funds, and we are in a good position since Be Foundation can match public resources with its private resources, and those funds are in hand,” explained Be Foundation Executive Director Richard Wenning. “It would be wonderful if we can use ARPA funds for a local match as well. It’s a good use of foundation resources to leverage public resources to accomplish something in the community for the benefit of our town.”

First Selectwoman Julia Pemberton said that the ARPA Funds Working Group had not yet

discussed the proposal nor made recommendations on funding the project to the Board of Selectmen, but she anticipates that this process would happen by early spring of this year. While a public-private partnership of this nature is in some ways unique for Redding, she did note that the Town has had some experience with this sort of investment.

“The Town has a long history of partnering with other groups to save open space,” Pemberton explained, referencing partnerships with the Redding Land Trust, Aquarion, The Nature Conservancy, and Redding Open Land, Inc. “This would be a situation where the Town would be investing in private property for public benefit.”

Be Foundation envisions this public benefit to be achieved through arts, cultural, and community programming at the Granite Church building, contributing to the economic revitalization of Georgetown, broader access to the arts and space for Redding and area residents, and the preservation of a historically-significant building at the gateway of the larger Gilbert & Bennett Wire Mill site, which is poised for redevelopment.

“To me these things are all part of a big flywheel to help sustain and strengthen Redding overall and specifically contribute cohesion and community fabric to the Village of Georgetown – and that of course includes as well Wilton, Weston, and Ridgefield,” Wenning explained.

“We at Georgetown Village Restoration, Inc., are excited

about the future of the Granite Church. Rich and Be Foundation are very community-minded and thoughtful with their planning, which is a boon for Georgetown,” said Kate Perry, Secretary of Georgetown Village Restoration, Inc., a non-profit devoted to facilitating the revitalization of the historic Village of Georgetown. “It’s wonderful that the church will become an important part of the community once again – the timing is ideal with the town’s renewed efforts with the Gilbert & Bennett Wire Mill.”

The historic building, built in 1902 and originally known as the Gilbert Memorial Church, faces a long list of capital projects to make it safe and functional for use once again. The work will be phased so that use of the building can begin even as later phases of the project, like façade repairs, landscaping, and renovations for energy efficiency, continue. The Be Foundation has already patched the 120-year-old slate roof to mitigate leakage over the winter, but it will eventually need replacement. Next up is remediation and renovation of the basement, which has sustained water damage, and a focus on getting the heat, water, and bathrooms in functional states so that basic use of the building can begin.

“It’s probably going to be a \$3 million project, and that’s \$3 million injected into the economic development of Georgetown,” Wenning said. “We really want to see this spur commercial success of our for-profit businesses right there in Georgetown.”

The Foundation held an Open House event for the community in November 2022 to begin gathering feedback and ideas on how best to utilize the building. Community gathering space, dance and rehearsal studios, non-profit and small business office space, a concert stage, dance floor, a day-time café with local products for purchase, and a pollinator pathway are just a few of the many possibilities that have been put forward. Those conversations are ongoing with local residents and institutions; Wenning also noted that the Foundation is creating an Advisory Circle of community members in music and the arts to advise on future programming and urged residents to continue sending ideas and feedback as the project continues to unfold. “Anyone who would love to volunteer to help shape the direction of the church, is welcome,” he said.

“It is the best possible outcome for this building,” Pemberton said. “The Be Foundation’s mission is admirable, they have worked for a long time in the field of music and educational programs for children who don’t always have access to music education... they also live in Redding and have a vested interest in not only preserving a piece of our history, but also in supporting economic development and bringing again a vibrancy to what is our downtown. It is a worthy investment in our community.” ■