



**Town of Natick, Massachusetts**  
Department of Community and Economic Development  
13 East Central Street Natick, Massachusetts 01760

Telephone  
(508) 647-6450  
[www.natickma.org](http://www.natickma.org)

James Freas, AICP  
Director

**MEMORANDUM**

**DATE:** December X, 2020

**TO:** Select Board  
Melissa Malone, Town Administrator

**FROM:** James Freas, Director of Community & Economic Development

**RE:** Sawin House

**Meeting Date:** December xx, 2020

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Conversations about the disposition of the historic Sawin House located on Mass Audubon's Broadmoor Wildlife Sanctuary property have been on-going since at least 2011. The Natick Historical Society and the Natick Historical Commission view the building as an essential element of Natick's historic legacy, a physical representation of an important part of Natick's colonial-era history. For Mass Audubon, the building is surplus to their mission as a nature preserve. In recognition of its historic value, Mass Audubon and historic preservation advocates have worked over many years to attempt to arrive at a mutually acceptable future for the building. In terms of agreeing on necessary actions and long-term operations of the building, historic preservation advocates and Mass Audubon have mostly reached an agreement, embodied in a draft transfer agreement. The critical issue to be resolved though, is the Town's willingness to accept ownership of the building with the attendant initial and on-going costs.

**Critical Issue: Town Ownership of the Sawin House**

The viability of any agreement to preserve the Sawin House on the Broadmoor property depends on the Town taking ownership of the building. Understandably, from the perspective of Mass Audubon, they need to have a reliable long-term partner to ensure that the terms of any agreement are met and the building is safely maintained. Operations and day-to-day oversight of the building can be designated to another entity, but the Town must own the structure. Essentially, the issue can be understood as a set of costs and benefits.

**Costs**

The costs of owning the Sawin House building can be divided into three general categories: ongoing cost, costs of immediate obligations, and the cost of restoring the building. The proposed agreement identifies each of these cost categories as obligations that would ultimately fall to the Town if not assigned to another entity.

Ongoing costs – The agreement requires the Town to maintain liability insurance, property insurance, and workmen’s compensation insurance. The estimated cost of these policies would be approximately \$3,287 annually.

Immediate Obligations – The agreement would require the Town to separate the water and electric service for the Sawin House from that of Audubon’s maintenance building. Estimated cost for these improvements would be approximately \$6,000 (this is a very rough, ballpark figure).

Building Restoration and other improvements – The central element of this agreement is the stabilization and restoration of the Sawin House itself. Best estimate currently available puts the cost of building stabilization at approximately \$305,000. Advocates for the preservation of the Sawin House believe that this cost could be funded through a grant from the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC). MHC generally caps these grants at \$100,000 and require 50% matching funds according to information on their website. Use of these funds is also contingent on a maintenance agreement in perpetuity. As currently written, the transfer agreement requires stabilization of the house to be completed within 4 years.

Interior restoration of the Sawin House would be a longer-term effort that would require separate funding. In addition, after stabilization of the Sawin House, allowing public visitation will require the construction of a 6-vehicle parking lot, with an estimated cost of \$120,000.

### Benefits

Broadly, with many specifics still to be determined, the terms of the agreement require that the Town take ownership of the building (and just the building) and be responsible for seeing through various repairs and improvements, as discussed above. In exchange, the Town gains preservation of the historic asset with limited rights of public visitation – as currently proposed it is 2 days per month and limited by the occupancy of the 6-space parking lot. Visitation/access rights are still negotiable but the clear intent is that the site not become a major program space or location for events. Essentially, the site may be used for educational and historic interpretation purposes related to the history of the Sawin House itself. One could imagine historians and similar researchers visiting the site or educational gatherings of students or adults sponsored by the Natick Historical Society.

### **Next Steps**

While the Town, advocates for preservation of the Sawin House, and Mass Audubon have not finalized the terms of a transfer agreement, the broad outlines of what that agreement will likely be are clearly apparent. In particular, the agreement identifies the immediate and long-term costs and the range of access Mass Audubon, as the property owner, will be willing to grant. **The question for the Select Board at this time is whether they will be willing to consider sponsoring a Town Meeting warrant article at the 2021 Spring Annual Town Meeting to allow the transfer of the Sawin House to Town ownership and incorporate into the budget an**

**appropriate sum of money to cover immediate costs.** If so, then the three parties should move to complete negotiations of the transfer agreement and the Sawin House preservation group should develop a fundraising plan, in coordination with the Town. The Select Board's final decision on sponsoring such a warrant article would be based on a final transfer agreement and fundraising/financing plan. If there are other questions or issues the Select Board would like investigated before this decision, these should be raised now.

A fundraising/financing plan is an essential step at this point so that the Town can more clearly anticipate the cost implications. The goal of this plan should be to limit Town costs to the greatest extent possible.

Should the Select Board decide now or in the future to not sponsor a Town Meeting warrant article, Mass Audubon will likely begin the process of demolishing the building as its continued deterioration will soon begin to pose a safety issue for their staff and visitors. Natick's demolition delay bylaw means that, once Mass Audubon submits a demolition permit application, it will be a little over six months before they will be able to demolish the building, offering a period of time during which Sawin House preservation advocates may have an opportunity to suggest further alternatives or preservation strategies.