

## **Our Historic Organ: Its glories and gotchas**

On Sunday, May 3, the membership will be asked to approve the formation of a steering committee to undertake a project to renovate our historic Alley (1834), Hutchings (1889), Andover (1957) organ. This meeting comes after more than two years of work by the Parish Committee and two task forces that have studied the organ and the full range of options to address its problems and shortcomings and have sought the best builder possible to carry out our chosen, conservative approach to renovating the instrument.

Those in attendance at church on Sunday, April 19, were treated to the masterful organ play of Scot Huntington, the organ builder we have chosen to do the renovation should the membership approve the project and the money be raised. Scot chose his music carefully. The prelude featured the pipes added to the original 1834 organ in 1889. It was a hauntingly beautiful and quiet piece by a 27-year-old doctoral candidate at the Eastman School of Music. The offertory, a piece by Handel, featured the original pipes by Joseph Alley dating to 1834. These pipes are among the oldest American-built pipes still existing in New England, and perhaps anywhere in the US. The Bach postlude demonstrated the organ in all its glory.

If you left before the demonstration Scot did after the service, you might have thought, "Wow, the organ sounds great; why do we have to renovate it?" The more than 40 people who stayed heard Scot talk lovingly about the organ and demonstrate some of the gotchas that make the argument for renovation as an act of preservation of this important instrument. From pipes that make no sound to keys that make two pipes sound at once, from unreliable electrical connections to the liberal use of duct tape, Scot shared with us some of the reasons we really must do something.

We learned that the organ is unlikely to cease functioning anytime soon, but we were also helped to understand the needs with an analogy with which most of us can identify. Scot compared our current situation to a homeowner with a leaky roof. You can work around the leak and live in the house, but eventually it will stain the plaster. If you wait long enough, the plaster will come down, and there might even be rot in the wood from all the water. All the while, the cost to fix the problem goes up and up.

So, after a thorough process, the Parish Committee has determined that, after 30 years since the last major repair and over 50 since the last renovation, the time to act is now.

## **Frequently asked questions about the organ renovation proposal and project**

What alternatives to the chosen path were considered?

The members of the first Organ Task Force spent several months studying the assessment of the organ done by an independent consultant in 2005. They visited a number of local organ builders and mapped out the alternatives from maintaining the organ as it has been for some time to replacing it with a new, more comprehensively capable instrument. The cost of the alternatives considered ranged from spending as little as possible and only when absolutely necessary to spending over \$1,600,000.

The Parish Committee accepted the recommendation of the task force to pursue the most conservative approach considered: renovate what we have and make small enhancements where necessary and affordable.

How was Scot chosen?

We were fortunate to have three outstanding proposals from three nationally and internationally recognized organ builders. Each considered the specifications and

provided a unique approach to meeting them. The Organ Task Force visited the workshops of each builder and a minimum of two sites of organs each had renovated. Finally, a thorough check of references, both written and by phone, for each was conducted. All three builders were fully qualified to complete our project.

Scot was chosen because through his proposal and our meetings with him, he demonstrated the highest level of sensitivity to the historical importance of the instrument, the strongest commitment to restoring as much of the significant material remaining in the organ, and conservative but creative solutions to some of the challenges our organ presents. We also appreciated the sensitivity he brought as the only real musician among the responders. Finally proposed costs ranged from \$240,000 to \$300,000. Scot's bid was the least expensive.

How long will the renovations take?

Renovation will take twelve to fourteen months. The instrument will be removed from the church and transported to Scot's workshop in Stonington, CT. The Music Committee and our new Music Director will work out the specific plans for music during the organ's absence.

How will the project work?

The Parish Committee has asked for authorization to form a steering committee to plan and execute the fund-raising efforts and oversee the completion of the project. A similar committee performed the same functions during our building project in 2001. The steering committee will define the detailed plan for fund raising, which will likely include solicitation of pledges to be fulfilled over a multi-year period, and will actively seek foundation and other non-FRS sources of funding. As with the building project, the budget for the project includes a provision for a "clerk of the works" for the project who has expertise in the field and who will help the committee manage the project.

How much will the project cost?

The total cost of the project is \$289,900, including Scot's cost of \$238,000, a 5% contingency, funds to retain a clerk of the works, and an allowance for leveling the gallery floor and for possible structural work to reinforce the floor.

Why does it cost so much?

Pipe organs are called the king of instruments because of their musical and esthetic beauty and versatility. They are also among the most complex mechanical devices ever created. Our organ has over 1,100 pipes, each connected to the keyboard via thousands of moving parts. At any given time, to produce a single chord nearly 100 pipes could be sounding at once. To make them all sound consistently and well a huge amount of wind must be delivered to them at a constant pressure. Add to this complexity the art and workmanship necessary to create a beautiful sound and you see the ingredients for a costly object.

The cost today to replace our organ with a new one of equal quality would easily exceed \$1.2 million. The renovation path chosen will cost less than 25% of that and seems a reasonable price to pay every 50-100 years to preserve and maintain the historic instrument we have.

Where can I learn more about this project?

Please go to [www.frsuu.org](http://www.frsuu.org) and click on the photograph of the organ. You will find the full report and recommendation of the Task Force as well as other documents of interest. Also members of the Organ Task Force would be happy to answer questions you might have.