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MVRTA center to break ground

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AMESBURY — The Merrimack Valley Regional Transportation Center is a building that's been conceptualized by town leaders since 2004.

A week from today, the first shovel for the 18-month-long construction project is finally slated to hit the ground. It's on that day that residents who have been envisioning how the \$8 million center will change the look of Amesbury's Elm Street will be able to begin viewing the transformation for themselves.

According to Bruce Tobyne, who is managing the project on behalf of Newburyport's Castagna Construction, the first task at hand will be one of demolition.

"We're going to be doing the demolition of the existing buildings," Tobyne said. "It's the old Namco buildings, and then there is a house in front of it. We're going to be out there for about three weeks."

Tobyne said that beginning Aug. 23, residents will notice Castagna's heavy equipment and construction vehicles entering and exiting Railroad Avenue in varying intervals, with an increased frequency in the early weeks of construction as the buildings on site are demolished, boxed up and carried off site.

"They're going to be doing (the demolition) with heavy machinery — heavy equipment — and then putting it in appropriate boxes for salvage," Tobyne said. "We'll also be doing some site work in between that. We'll be moving some earth around and putting in some utilities and doing foundation work."

Castagna crews will be doing whatever they can to get the project ready to the point where it can be covered and protected before winter weather comes on hard and fast.

"We're going to go right through winter," Tobyne said. "That's why we have to move on it fast, so we can get it closed by the winter time."

Tobyne said that by the time the snow flies, residents should expect to see plenty of actual building activity and progress on the Center at the site, with the beginnings of the steel structure taking shape. But in these first early weeks, the project will mostly entail moving equipment on site and clearing the Railroad Avenue lot of the commercial buildings that have stood on that parcel of land since the late 19th century, he said.

One of the buildings to be torn down goes back even farther than the late 1800s, in fact, and will require some extra attention through the demolition process, as required by Amesbury's Historical Commission.

The old saltbox home that once stood alone as the dwelling place of a local shipwright, and is estimated to be one of the oldest houses in Amesbury, was originally obscured from view by its more modern attachments to the commercial buildings around it.

While assessing the building and location for demolition, planners discovered that the old house-like office slated to be demolished to make way for the Center hid an early 18th century homestead. With its white modern siding, attached years ago

to presumably blend in with the look of the newer commercial structure, the house and its bones weren't visible to the naked eye. But with help from local historian Steve Klomps, the house was determined to be the fifth-oldest home in Amesbury.

Klomps has said the home and its first occupant, Joseph Flanders Jr. (1707-1776), harken back to the time when that section of Amesbury was actually part of Salisbury and laid claim to a thriving clipper shipbuilding industry. Flanders was discovered from the town records to be a caulker by trade, so Klomps thinks he may have been employed at the well-known shipbuilding center known to have thrived on the Powow River at that time.

Klomps also found that the younger Flanders actually purchased the quarter-acre plot of land from his father Joseph (1677-1734), a potter by trade, who bought the larger two-acre plot of land in 1699 from William Osgood Sr., a yeoman, of Salisbury.

Upon further study by the Historic Commission, however, it was determined this year that there was little left of the old home worth salvaging. The Commission requested the opportunity to come in and inspect the home once it was separated from the buildings around it.

"As soon as the contractor gets to the point where he's ready to demolish the building, they're going to set up a meeting with the historic commission to carry out their obligation and the Historic Commission will have the ability to go in, look at what — if anything — should be salvaged, and make the recommendation," said Town Planner Nipun Jain. "Then, it's up to the applicant to either oblige or not. The applicant has said if it's easy, and you want it to be moved to a local museum, that's probably fine. They're more than willing to accommodate any requests based on the site visit, and the commission members are happy with that."

When asked how it feels to have the Transportation Center finally get under way after how long it took to get to this point, Council President Robert Lavoie said "it feels great."

"Even though it is amazing to think that it took 10 years from concept to ground-breaking, the fact remains that perseverance does pay off," Lavoie said. "With all the recent hoopla about 'shovel-ready projects,' the Transportation Center reminds us that good fortune is just really all about preparation meeting opportunity. Thankfully, this was a great regional partnership idea that made sense when conceived, and it remains so to this day."

There will be a Ground-breaking Ceremony for the Center Thursday, Aug. 26, at 10:15 a.m. at the construction site on Railroad Avenue. Congressman John Tierney, among other elected officials and guests, will be present.