

Belmont residents try to save Gale School

BYLINE: ROGER AMSDEN Union Leader Correspondent

DATE: September 23, 2006

PUBLICATION: New Hampshire Union Leader (Manchester, **NH**)

EDITION: State

SECTION: Local

PAGE: B1

BELMONT -- Can lightning strike twice in the same place?

That's what members of the Save the Gale School Committee are hoping for as they try and replicate the 1995 "Miracle on Main Street" that saved the **Belmont** Mill.

The mill, badly damaged in a 1992 fire, was perilously close to being torn down when a citizen's group led by Wallace Rhodes obtained a temporary restraining order against selectmen, who were on the verge of having the 1833 red brick mill demolished. Townspeople responded and the mill was rehabilitated, thanks in part to \$700,000 in community development block grant money and the involvement of organizations like Plan **NH**.

Today the four-story, 10,773 square foot mill is the pride of the **Belmont** Village area and is home to the town's senior center, the Belknap Family Health Center, the Food for Thought cafe operated by students in New Hampshire Vocational-Technical College's culinary arts program and a day care center.

Diane Marden, who heads the Save the Gale School Committee, says that she hopes that something of the same can happen with the 1894 Gale School, which sits on a hill behind the **Belmont** Middle School and hasn't been used for anything except cold storage and a Halloween haunted house since 1985.

"We'd like to see it stay where it is and be used for school administrative offices," says Marden. The school is owned by the Shaker Regional School District (**Belmont** and Canterbury) and the school board wants to move the building to make way for a school bus turnaround. The school district has expressed a willingness to give the building to an organization which would preserve it and even turn the money it would require to demolish the school over to the organization to help pay the cost of moving it.

Last week the board voted to have its buildings and grounds committee explore options for the possible restoration and future use of the school, which is named for Napoleon Bonaparte Gale, a local benefactor gave the town \$30,000 in 1896 and for whom Laconia's public library is named. But the price tag for moving and renovating the school is nearly \$1 million, something the Shaker School Board must weigh as it tries again to win voter approval for a \$5.8 million bond issue for an 800-seat auditorium/fine arts building next March.

Would Canterbury voters support spending money on the Gale School? And if the building were to be moved would the town of **Belmont** find any use for it? Marden says she doesn't know the answer to those questions but is hopeful that the committee and other interested parties will come up with a workable plan to save the school. Marden said that the committee, which was formed in August and sold T-shirts at Old Home Day to raise funds for its effort is receiving lots of support, not only in **Belmont**, but in other communities where Gale School alumni live. Another fundraiser will see an oil painting based on a 1901 postcard of the school raffled. It was painted by Donna Blanchard Manning, who was the very first Miss **Belmont** in 1967.

The committee is planning a cleanup day on Oct. 14 at 10 a.m. and spaghetti dinner at the Tilt'n Diner on Oct. 18. Madren said that one major problem is that the committee doesn't own the school which makes it difficult to qualify for grant money from historic preservation groups. It has applied to be on the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance's ``Seven to Save" list of historic buildings which should be saved. She said the school board has accepted a gift from Daniel Romprey, who attended Gale School, of a fire alarm and security system that will help protect the building while it's future is being decided.