Fate of Belmont's historic Gale School remains in doubt

BELMONT — The school district has gathered bids from contractors to demolish the historic Gale School, which has been used for little aside from cold storage since 1985.

Meanwhile, four local residents who organized the Save the Gale School movement more than a decade ago say a donor, who they are not naming, has come forward and offered to donate thousands of dollars worth of site excavation work on the building.

The group hopes to have more donors come forward, said Ken Knowlton, one of the four working to preserve the school building. The anonymous donor is working to find more donors as well, he said.

“Our hope is revived,” said Knowlton. “That someone would step up and donate such an important and costly construction step, as well as try to locate others who might also want to take part in such a worthy goal, is nothing short of phenomenal.”

Built in 1894, the school sits on a hill behind Belmont Middle School. The school was named after Napoleon Bonaparte Gale, a local benefactor who gave the town $30,000 for the library in 1896 and for whom Laconia’s public library is named.

The disposition of the school building has come up repeatedly at school district meetings over the years, as committees have formed to try to come up with alternatives for the building. Many Belmont residents went to school at the building, and have shown interest in preserving it, Knowlton said.

The school district, which has been trying to work with preservation groups on saving the school, has nonetheless gathered bids for demolishing the large old building, said Doug Ellis,
the school district’s director of building and grounds.

“We’ve just asked for estimates on how much it would cost to take the building down,” said Ellis, adding that the estimates have come in above $1 million.

The building would need to be moved to be preserved, Ellis said, and there are some problems in the building’s structure, such as asbestos that needs to be removed.

“But would the people want to pay more than a million dollars to demolish the building when it could use that money for something else in the school system? I don’t know,” Ellis said.

Superintendent Maria Dreyer said the Shaker Regional School Board hasn’t yet made a decision on what to do next, but the issue may be presented to voters at the annual school district meeting this year.

“It’s possible, but the board has not made any decisions as of yet,” Dreyer said. “The building would need major renovations if it were to be saved.”

Those working to move the building say they are hopeful that they will have time to find more people willing to donate money and/or services to save the building.

“We don’t have many historical buildings left,” Knowlton said. “The Gale School was also an important part of our town’s history, and provided the education of many Belmont students over the years. It is our hope that this is the start of its preservation.”

“We hope, once again, to beat a wrecking ball,” he said.

dseufert@newstote.com