

Gale School advocates chafe at delays in moving building



In 2016, after a ballot vote, 128 people at the Shaker Regional School District meeting voted to save the Gale School while 104 voted to tear it down. Now, advocates for moving and reusing the building are growing impatient, waiting for the school board to take action. (David Carkhuff/Laconia Daily Sun)

By DAVID CARKHUFF/THE LACONIA DAILY SUN

BELMONT — Advocates for moving and saving the 1894 Gale School want answers.

Nearly a year after voters approved an agreement to give the historic building a new home, a nonprofit group is waiting on the Shaker Regional School Board to fulfill their end of the bargain.

"Without the ownership of the building, we can't do anything," said Diane Marden, representing the Save Our Gale School Committee.

"They know we're supposed to be taking over this building," Marden said in an interview Wednesday, wondering why it's taking so long for the School Board to hand over the deed.

"The taxpayers voted on that last year. And they haven't contacted us. We handed over everything at the deliberative session but we haven't heard a thing," she said.

In 2016, after a ballot vote, 128 people at the Shaker Regional School District meeting voted to save the building while 104 voted to tear it down. As a compromise, voters directed the Shaker Regional School District to either sell for a nominal fee or donate the Gale School to the Save Our Gale School Committee, on the condition that the group acquire a federal nonprofit 501(c)(3) status before voting day in 2017. Committee members note that they have secured that status.

Voters also directed the school district to provide a lot at the corner of Concord Street and Memorial Drive to the committee as a future home for the historic school building.

Woody Fogg of Belmont, who is helping the committee, came up with the final wording of last year's amended Article 8. The reworded article included donating the building to the Save Our Gale School Committee, supplying the corner lot at the corner and setting aside \$71,000 that the district budgeted to tear it down and instead using that money to help pay for the move.

"It's a unique architectural building. I call it a gem," Fogg said.

"It seems the right thing to do to move it somewhere, get it out of the school district's way, and put it to a good use," he said.

In the school district's existing 2012-2017 strategic plan, facilities-related goals and recommendations include a goal to improve the traffic flow at Belmont Middle School "by moving or removing the historic Gale School to free up space for a bus loop and additional parking." This effort remains in the planning stage, according to district staff, and this goal is under review with the rest of the planning document.

The Shaker Regional School District is hosting a strategic planning workshop on March 10-11, and district officials hope the public will attend to brush up the district's planning document and update its goals. (To participate, the public can RSVP to register for one or both days, by Wednesday, March 8, to Alicia Sperazzo at (603) 267-9223 or [This email address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it. \(mailto:asperazzo@sau80.org\)](mailto:asperazzo@sau80.org).) (mailto:asperazzo@sau80.org)

What will happen to the Gale School remains to be seen.

Sean Embree, chairman of the Shaker Regional School Board, responded to an email inquiry Wednesday by reporting, "Your timing is slightly early in that we're in the process of trying to schedule a meeting with our attorney to help guide us on some options. We'll know more after the meeting with him which will be sometime this month, possibly on the 14th."

No action regarding the Gale School was taken at this year's deliberative session of School District Meeting, the first such session to be held in Belmont under the newly implemented SB2 format.

At that session on Wednesday, Feb. 8, Embree told Fogg that the board decided not to do anything with the Gale School because it was the first year of SB2, but Embree said the issue was likely to come up again, according to minutes of the meeting. Later, when Gale School advocates pressed for why no money was set aside in the proposed budget for the move, Embree promised to add the issue to a future agenda. Advocates for the building argued that the 2016 vote took care of changing ownership, but school district officials were uncertain about the need for another public vote, according to meeting records.

On Tuesday, Feb. 14, School Board member Heidi Chaney said she would like to have the Gale School added to a future agenda. Also at that meeting, in a discussion about the deliberative session, board members said they would like to meet and talk about the Gale School.

Marden said the delay is irksome.

"There are no restrictions on the deed that would prevent them from giving us the school. The school (board) is dragging its feet," she said. "We have met all of the School Board's requirements."

Fogg noted that a structural engineer a few years ago found the building to be in sound condition.

"In 2016, I listened to the discussion, and it seemed like the school district or the school board needed a way out, they needed some way of getting that school off their property because it's in their way. I understand that. They didn't really want to tear it down but didn't know what else to do," Fogg said.

"The amendment passed, then at this year's School District Meeting I hadn't seen anything in the school district budget about spending that \$71,000 to move the building, so I asked the question, 'What's going on?' And they said they needed authorization to do that. We came back and said, 'You have it. You had it last year. That was authorization.'"

Marden said, "There appears to be no problems whatsoever. They should be acting on this."

Part of the frustration stems from the decades of effort applied toward saving the building.

"The School Board has kept us at bay all these years," Marden said.

The 1894 Gale School was built by Cyris Norris and named after Napolian Gale, who left \$10,000 to the town of Belmont (formerly Upper Gilmanton) to build a school building, Marden reports on a website dedicated to the school's preservation (<http://belmontnh.homestead.com/files/2016GalePresentation0001.pdf>).

Gale himself was born in 1815 at his father's farm on Mile Hill Road, and he was for years prominent in banking circles in Laconia, the website notes. The remainder of Gale's estate was left to the city of Laconia and used to build and pay for the Gale Memorial Library, the history reports. Gale represented Belmont residents in the State Legislature during 1867 and 1868, the history notes.

The school closed in 1985. Supporters of saving the Gale School formed the Save Our 1894 Gale School Committee, and they now have a mover and a list of supporters to help relocate it.

"We're confident we can move it," Marden said.

Marden said she is passionate about Belmont and has "very deep roots in this town."

Marden said she was instrumental in establishing the Belmont Fire Department's clerical duties, her grandfather Harold Reed was road agent and also a volunteer fire chief, and her great-great-grandfather, Howard Reed, was the town's first volunteer fire chief.

Moving the school building would require creation of a temporary road, removal of steps near the middle school and permission from an abutter to clear part of an embankment.

Last year, the committee estimated that phase one of moving the school building would cost \$237,850, although Marden cautioned that many services could be donated to lower this estimate.

"Unfortunately, the school just hasn't made the decision," she said.

Fogg said, "I'm a believer that you can do things when people work together. Saving that school is worth doing."