

Questions surround Gale School's future home



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. On Tuesday, April 11, the Shaker Regional School Board is scheduled to take action on the building's future at a board meeting at Canterbury Elementary School. (David Carkhuff/Laconia Daily Sun)

Save Our Gale School Committee says public vote gave board direction already; School Board members don't want to give up corner lot, lean toward selling building

By DAVID CARKHUFF, LACONIA DAILY SUN

BELMONT — The Shaker Regional School District may draft a request for proposals to sell the historic Gale School, but where the building will go isn't clear.

One condition of a public vote last year — that the school district give a lot at the corner of Concord Street and Memorial Drive to a committee as a future home for the historic school building — appears to be off the table.

In 2016, after a ballot vote, 128 people at the Shaker Regional School District meeting voted to save the school 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(c3) status before voting day in 2017. Committee members now note that they have secured that status.

But at Tuesday's School Board meeting, trustees balked at the notion of providing the corner lot, apparently based on an opinion from legal counsel Jim O'Shaughnessy with Drummond Woodsum in Manchester.

However, Shaker Regional School District Superintendent Michael Tursi, after the meeting, said the School Board will not release the memo from O'Shaughnessy, treating it as confidential attorney-client communication.

"It won't take very long at all," Tursi told School Board members about the time needed to redraft the legal opinion and make it public.

The School Board will see the document first, and then possibly the Save Our Gale School Committee "as a courtesy," Tursi said.

Meanwhile, indications of how the board is leaning came from a discussion at the Tuesday meeting in Belmont.

Trustee Sean Embree said, "I'm in favor of what Jim (O'Shaughnessy) is proposing as far as I personally don't want to raze the Gale School, but I would also like to move it off district property so we're not responsible for it."

Embree said, "The plan, I thought, would be to try to get a buyer who would purchase it and move it off the property."

Newly chosen Vice Chairman Patty Brace said, "If we don't get a buyer, then we go back to the voters to raze it."

As Embree pressed for action after years of deliberation, Brace said, "Basically, as a board, we're really looking to just have a decision made. Not having to keep rehashing this year after year after year."

Trustee Jennifer Sottak said, "That land is not going to be there for them to move it to," agreeing the process should go back to the beginning.

Trustee Heidi Chaney alluded to "issues" of whether the school district can allow the building to be moved to the vacant corner lot.

Brace said, "We all agree we are not in favor of selling that land because we don't know what purpose we might have for it down the road. I like the idea of offering the Gale School committee the opportunity to purchase it.

Then, purchase it, take it where you want to bring it."

Embree said, "Just to be clear, it would go out to bid, correct? So we're not favoring any specific entity or group."

The School Board appeared to agree with that idea, and the use of the request for proposals as a possible vehicle to find a buyer.

Sottak asked if a buyer could purchase the building and then tear it down, but Embree said the board could attach conditions that prevent that.

Embree said, "My biggest concern right now is getting the legal opinion out so people are aware."

Tursi said O'Shaughnessy is redrafting a letter to provide that legal opinion. Once the district receives that updated letter, Tursi said the legal opinion could be disseminated and perhaps posted on the district website.

Woodbury Fogg of Belmont, who is helping the Save Our Gale School 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 and setting aside \$71,000 that the district wanted to budget to tear it down and instead using that money to help pay for the move, he said.

On Wednesday, Fogg said the Save Our Gale School Committee has spent countless hours trying to find a tenant to

reuse the building, based on the "commitment, if you will, that the voters made last year and the direction they gave the School Board. I don't have a problem with them asking for proposals, but to me they would have to go back to the voters and tell them we have another alternative. The voters told them to give it to the Save Our Gale School Committee."

Fogg acknowledged that some votes by the public are advisory, such as a similar effort in Belmont to determine the fate of the historic Belmont Mill. A set of votes taken this year were considered advisory, with no costs attached and simply "to give the selectmen the benefit of public sentiment," Fogg said.

But the school district article gave specific direction, Fogg said.

"As a non-attorney and as a citizen, the last time I looked, the voters have the final say. There was nothing advisory about it, it was a motion, I made it," he said.

Ken Knowlton, member of the Save Our Gale School Committee, in an interview Wednesday agreed that the vote in 2016 provided specific direction.

"Basically, I thought they said it was advisory until such time that we got our charitable organization status, and then everything else would fall into place," Knowlton said. "They basically gave us a hurdle to jump, and once we did it, they would support" the Save Our Gale School Committee effort.

Residents in Canterbury have gone out of their way to preserve historic buildings, and yet the School Board doesn't seem interested in saving them, Knowlton said.

"They have never been supportive of saving that school. For some reason, there is an absence of historic caring," he said.

Both Fogg and Knowlton questioned the usefulness of the corner lot to the school district.

"That piece of property is not going to be used for any type of expansion," Knowlton said. "It's been the way it is for years and years. The way the school population is lowering, I don't see any future expansion of parking lots or anything in that direction."

Fogg said the corner lot formerly was a potential spot for expansion of the high school, prior to construction of the existing Belmont High School. But declining enrollment indicates that expansion isn't likely, he agreed.

School Board members noted that the \$71,000 appropriation from last year's article remained in the budget, but that the funding lapses June 30, at the end of the fiscal year.

In the opinion of "attorneys," Tursi said that \$71,000 could be spent on planning or costs of developing the request for proposals, but Embree and Brace supported the idea of leaving the \$71,000 in the budget.

Embree said, "People have an opinion about what that money was for. It was to move it to the corner lot. I'm a little nervous about using it for any other purpose other than that. I realize we're going to have some costs as part of this, but I don't know how I feel about using that money for other purposes."

Brace said, "If we don't touch it, we can give it back to the taxpayers, correct? And I personally think that's what we should do."

Tursi said, "If you're going to tackle this, you start fresh," agreeing with the idea of leaving the \$71,000 unspent.

In the school district's existing 2012-2017 strategic plan, now under revision, facilities-related goals and recommendations include one 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.

Fogg said, "The Gale School issue has been hanging around for a long time."

"Gale School was constructed by Cyris Norris for the Town of Belmont in 1894," reports the website, Save Our Gale School 1894 (<http://belmontnh.homestead.com/GaleSchoolSAVE.html>). "It was later named Gale School after Napoleon B. Gale who left \$10,000 to the Town." In 1985, when Belmont Elementary School was built, "the Gale School ceased operation being used for cold storage."

Director of Building and Grounds Doug Ellis said staff have moved supplies out of the Gale School into a storage building. The historic building is packed with items placed in storage, he said.

At 5 p.m. Tuesday, April 11, the Shaker Regional School Board scheduled the Gale School issue as an action item at its board meeting at Canterbury Elementary School.