As sole bidder, Save Our Gale School Committee is ready to act

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BELMONT — A nonprofit group created to preserve the Gale School from destruction is looking to move the building and convert it into office space.

The Save Our Gale School Committee was the sole bidder with a plan to remove the shuttered building from its lot near Belmont Middle School, but the Shaker Regional School Board delayed action until its Oct. 24 meeting.

“We’re waiting for this meeting in Canterbury, and it wouldn’t have happened if we had people come to show their support for our proposal,” said Ken Knowlton, a member of the Save Our Gale School Committee.

The committee, formed in 2006 after the future of the building first came into question, has teamed up with the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance and Laconia Area Community Land Trust to develop a plan for its future.

Under the plan, the committee would raise funds to move the building to another lot, preparing the foundation and doing site work, as well as cleaning up the current site. It would hold onto the building until 2020 when the land trust would take over to convert the school into professional space for startup businesses and nonprofit agencies.

The committee expects to raise $100,000 by August 2018, noting that having the agreement in place with the school district is a necessary first step for fundraising. The committee currently has $2,372 in its bank account.

It hopes to relocate the building within a half-mile of its current location and is in preliminary discussions with St. Joseph Catholic Church to share its parking lot. Other possible locations are vacant lots on Route 108 and at 66 Concord St.

“It’s worth noting that our ideal lot remains the corner of Memorial Drive and Concord Street,” the committee states in bid documents.

The reference is to a lot that had been donated to the school district. Knowlton said it was donated as a place to relocate the Gale School, although he admits that stipulation was not put in writing.

Knowlton maintains that the corner lot is of no other use to the district. With a new high school and declining enrollments, there is no foreseeable need for a new building, he said.

Karmen Lorentz, executive director of the Laconia Area Community Land Trust, wrote a letter of support for the plan, saying, “While historic preservation is not part of our mission, one of our core values is, to maintain sustainability and the responsible use of resources. Adaptive reuse of an historic building like the Gale School fits in with our core values. Also, we have successfully redeveloped two historic school buildings in Laconia.”

The Belmont Historical Society also sent a letter of support, urging the School Board “not to entertain certain demolition by any other proposer.”

BrianWatson, president of the Belmont Heritage Commission, commented, “As a commission, we intend to partner with the Save Our Gale School Committee, along with the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance and the Laconia Area Community Land Trust to redevelop the Gale School, following its relocation.”

If the School Board approves the bid, it still would have to go before voters at the annual meeting in March. If approved there, site work could begin in May, with the building being moved in late July, according to the committee’s timeline.

Widespread support

The Gale School has been nominated for this year’s Seven To Save list maintained by the New Hampshire Historic Preservation Alliance, which will make an official announcement of the selections on Oct. 27 in Wolfeboro.

While the Shaker Regional School Board has considered razing the building, and appropriated $71,000 for that purpose, school district voters have consistently supported efforts to preserve the school, built in 1894 and used until 1985 when the new Belmont Elementary School opened.

Last year, voters passed an article directing the School Board to donate the building to the Save Our Gale School Committee, providing the corner lot at Concord Street and Memorial Drive, and setting aside the $71,000 to assist in the building’s relocation.

The motion included the condition that the committee must obtain a charitable 501(c)(3) designation, something Knowlton noted that the committee has achieved.

“I committed myself to make sure we did everything we could to give us the credibility they were seeking,” Knowlton said.

Knowlton said the School Board seems to prefer razing the building to relocating it.

“Since the school district meeting, the School Board has said they’re not going to give us the school, the property, or the money,” Knowlton said.

“The Gale School was the orphan child of the school district,” Knowlton said. “They boarded it up and wished it would go away.”

As to the money that voters wanted to go toward the school’s relocation, the school district’s attorney offered an opinion last spring that the $71,000 could not be used to move the Gale School because it had to serve an educational purpose.

The School Board’s request for proposals, however, stated that the school district would provide $70,000 to assist in the relocation of the building. The RFP required that the building be moved off its current site and located off school district property.

The School Board will meet on Oct. 24 at 6 p.m. at Canterbury Elementary School.