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Belmont's Gale School preservation effort hits milestone; now the heavy lifting begins

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Woody Fogg has seen the hand-hewn stick beams in the attic of the old Gale School a half-dozen times, but the sight never gets old.

"It's just a beautiful building," said Fogg, a civil engineer and member of the Save Our Gale School committee. "They just don't make them like this anymore. They just don't."

Out of use since 1997, the fate of the 1894 Stick-style building behind Belmont Middle School has been up in the air for decades, but a major milestone has been reached.

Last week, during the Shaker Regional School District annual voting session, residents approved the sale of the district-owned building to the nonprofit Gale School committee for \$1 by a resounding 620-130 vote.

"I'm just ecstatic. It's been a lot of work," said Diane Marden, chairwoman and president of Save Our Gale School committee.

The school means a lot to Marden, 51, who has deep roots in Belmont and remembers her elementary classes, taking art and music, and visiting the nurse's office in the building that served many different purposes over the years when the district expanded.

Her parents and grandparents went to school there.

"Five generations – maybe even six – for my family," she said. "There's a lot of memories for people."

For Marden, last Tuesday's vote was a sign of support of the greater district community, not just among Belmont residents. And it was a long time coming.

Members of the community have been working to save the school since it closed in 1984. Since then, another generation has grown up, graduated from college and had children of their own.

"I'm relieved and happy," Fogg said. "Mostly relieved because it's been so many years."

What to do with the aged building has been a topic of discussion and warrant articles at Shaker Regional's annual meetings for years, with residents continually voting in favor of saving the school in some way, but without any concrete solutions. That changed in 2017 when the school board put out a request for proposals for ways to remove the building from school property with a preference for plans to save it, rather than salvage it, and offered \$70,000 to help in relocation, to be paid upon complete removal of the structure.

Save Our Gale School was the sole bidder and winner in October. A purchase and sale agreement was made in January, and voters last week gave their approval.

"Now that we have the green light, we can go ahead and move forward," Fogg said before outlining the next steps for the committee: buy a lot and move the building.

Potential sites have surfaced in the past, but without a title to the building, commitments could not be made and opportunities were lost. Other locations are being pursued, Fogg said.

In the meantime, Save Our Gale School is looking for grants and donations because moving a building the size of the Gale School is no easy feat. Many Belmont-area businesses have already committed to help with the site work, excavation and tree removal, free of charge. But on top of that will be the cost to purchase an unknown property, as well as the contract to move the 125-ton building up and over Bryant Field to reach Route 106 and on to its new home.

There's no way to know right now how much the endeavor will cost, but Fogg has ballparked it and hopes it will be around \$100,000. That would be in addition to the \$70,000 offered by the school district.

It's a daunting number, but being placed on the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance's annual list of endangered historical structures gives the Gale School a great deal of credibility, and the committee is working with the alliance to find funding.

The committee has to work out all the details and get the school moved by August 2019, an extension from a 2018 deadline. If they can't get the historic building moved by then, the purchase and sale agreement would be voided and the school district would retain ownership.

Article 5 on last Tuesday's ballot would have given the district a contingency plan to go ahead and demolish the building should the committee fail to come through, but the article failed.

Shaker Regional School District school board Chairman Bob Reed was disappointed in that vote, but "absolutely ecstatic about Article 4."

"This has been something that has been on the plate of the school board and the town for ... 20 years or more, and we thought we were going to have an absolute resolution, but as it stands we've got a potential right now," he said.

"My personal feeling is – and I know it's shared by several – is that if we're not able to pull this off by August of 2019 it probably just isn't gonna happen," Fogg said.

"The school district does need to move the school. They need to get it out of the way."

Fogg takes a practical view of the deadline, not a defeatist one.

"We intend to move forward and get this done."

Once saved, the group wants to see the historic building repurposed in a way that benefits the community. The Lakes Region Community Developers (formerly the Laconia Area Community Land Trust) have expressed interest, as have other community service organizations.

"It's in such great shape structurally. It needs a lot of renovation work, but the structure itself is beautiful," Fogg said.

If the right buyer with the right vision comes along, Fogg said, the committee would be willing to part with the school for the same amount it bought it for – exactly \$1.

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