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Decision to not seek grant comes as a surprise in Belmont

BELMONT — Members of the town’s Heritage Commission are “surprised” that the selectmen last week decided against seeking a federal community development block grant for a feasibility study on alternative uses for the Gale School.

Town Administrator Jeanne Beaudin asked the selectmen at their meeting Wednesday night to agree to sponsor a planning grant for $12,000 to study restoration possibilities.

The selectmen decided against it.

“The board felt strongly that since the town doesn’t own the Gale School, and no money has yet been raised for renovations, the town should not pursue it,” Beaudin said.

Members of the Heritage Commission are disappointed. Commission chair Linda Frawley said the decision is contradictory given the positive direction of efforts since last fall to find alternatives to demolition.

Heritage Commission members are appointed by selectmen, and in recent years, the commission has played a central role in securing grant funds for town energy conservation, the town’s bandstand restoration, and the PlanNH effort that launched the Belmont Village Revitalization.

“I was very surprised to learn of the selectmen’s decision,” Frawley said. “It’s a complete reversal from Jan. 6, when a feasibility study, at no taxpayer cost, was discussed as a next step.”

The building is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, and received good grades in a recent assessment by structural engineers.

The school, which was built in 1894, sits on a hill behind the Belmont Middle School and has been used mostly for cold storage since 1985, when the Belmont Elementary School was constructed on Gilmanton Road.

The school was named for former resident Napoleon Bonaparte Gale, after he left the town funds following his death. The rest of his estate was given to the City of Laconia and built the Gale Memorial Library.
The future of the Gale School, its landmark bell tower and stately Queen Anne style roof, has come up repeatedly at school district meetings over the last decade. A “Save the Gale School” committee has led efforts to save and reuse the building, and most recently the team of former School Board chairman Pret Tuthill, Conservation Commission chairman Ken Knowlton and historic advocate Diane Marden.

The Heritage Commission meets this week and Frawley has offered to help with the grant, if municipal sponsorship is available.

dseufert@newstote.com