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The Gale School (COURTESY)

Gale School preservationists appeal to alumni for support

By DAN SEUFERT

Union Leader Correspondent

BELMONT — The Save the Gale School committee, which has been working to save the 1894 building that was the elementary school for all town students until 1985, is appealing to all alumni of the school to help raise hundreds of thousands of dollars to renovate it.

The committee has already raised more than \$100,000 of the \$789,450 required for renovations. The renovation cost comes from a study of the building done by Meredith architect Christopher Williams, who donated more than \$500 worth of his time to the committee in doing the work.

And the committee Tuesday night was set to present the Shaker Regional School District with an option that would avoid the district's proposed \$67,500 demolition of the building: Use the Gale School building for a new kindergarten or for new school district offices, as the district considers the potential for both needs.

"For the school district to throw this building away is ridiculous," said Diane Mardin, one of the committee's members. "There are better alternatives."

Another committee member, Ken Knowlton, said the committee has regained momentum it lost in past years, in part because it has received donations for one-seventh of the cost of renovations already. The committee is asking residents, who will vote on the demolition question at the annual school district meeting on March 6, to consider voting instead for a plan to use the Gale School to solve the district's space needs.

Knowlton said the committee may be able to raise most or all of the renovation costs, if the district will approve a new plan to use the school's ample space.

"How many people have gone through the doors of that school? We're hoping to pique the interest of the alumni, or of anyone who wants to preserve a beautiful old building," Knowlton said.

Built in 1894, the school sits on a hill behind Belmont Middle School. The school was named after Napoleon Bonaparte Gale, a local benefactor who gave the town \$30,000 to be used for the town library in 1896, and for whom Laconia's public library is named.

The school building's fate has come up repeatedly at school district meetings over the years, as committees have formed to try to come up with alternatives for the building. The school district, which has been trying to work with preservation groups to save the school, has nonetheless chosen a bid for demolishing the large old building.

Superintendent Maria Dreyer said the cost of renovating the building was considered, but was seen as too high. But committee members say there is strong sentiment in the community for a kindergarten, and the building could also be used as office space for the SAU 80 staff. The building could be moved to a new location, Knowlton said.

"At least now we have some alternatives that I think the voters may like better than tearing it down," he said.

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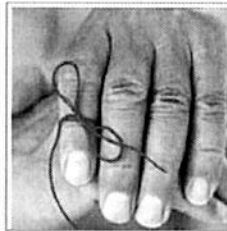
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