

Will the sun set this year on the Gale School?



The sun sets behind the Gale School. The building faces either demolition, a move, or renovation. (Courtesy photo/Jill Mahan)

By GAIL OBER, LACONIA DAILY SUN

BELMONT — It likely took less political time to build the Gale School in 1894 than it's taken to try to save the school from the wrecking ball which is an effort that began to some degree in 1993, according to the Save Our Gale School website.

This year, voters from both Canterbury and Belmont will weigh in on three separate warrant articles regarding the future of the former elementary- and middle-level school at the annual School District Meeting on Friday, March 4, at 7 p .m.

The warrants

The first is a request by the school district to spend \$71,000 to tear it down and preserve the bell tower and the bell. Though no numbers have been officially presented, there will be an additional cost to build a storage shed on school property to house the two until an appropriate use can be found for them.

The second two are generated by the Save Our Gale School Committee and placed on the warrant for the school district petitioned warrant article. The first of these, submitted by petition, calls for a total of \$242,878 and would relocate the school to the corner of Concord Street and restore it. Of that \$242,878, \$5,027 would come from the Gale School Expendable Trust, \$65,000 would come from the facilities trust fund, \$50,000 would come from the unassigned fund balance and \$122,878 would come through new taxation.

The second of these calls for a total of \$187,978, which would leave the Gale School in place and would put a foundation under it, as well as rehabilitate the building for possible use by the school district. To leave the building in place would cost \$77,979 in new taxes, or \$44,899 less than moving it.

Since the efforts by private citizens to save the school have been ongoing for about 22 years, it helps to know a little bit about this school and why it is so important to a small but dedicated group of people in Belmont.

The History of Gale School according to the Save Our Gale School Committee

The school was built in 1894 and named after Laconia banking magnate Napoleon Gale, who donate \$10,000 to the school. Gale also funded the Gale Memorial Library in Laconia.

From 1912 to 1942, other one-room school houses in Belmont gradually began to close and Gale School emerged as the elementary school for Belmont children. Belmont had no high school until 1937; however, during the early part of this time period, many students weren't educated beyond "grade" school. Those who attended high school usually went to Laconia High School, Gilmanton Academy – which is now the site for their town offices – and Tilton Seminary, typically at their own expense.

In the 1920s, Gale School added a ninth grade and split the seventh- and eighth-grade classrooms to allow more room for high schoolers.

Until 1955, when they built the Memorial School for grades one, two and three on the same site, the Gale School was used as by the Belmont schools' administration, the school nurse and secondary art.

In 1970 and 1971, students from Canterbury began attending Belmont High School, and in 1972 the combined district was formally established as the Shaker Regional School District.

The current Belmont Elementary School on Route 140 was built in 1985 and the Gale School was relegated to cold storage.

With the 1997 construction of the Belmont High School on Seavey Road, the former high school became the middle school and the old Memorial School became home to the administration. The Gale School was no longer used for anything.

Preservation Attempts

Discussions about saving the Gale School began around 1993 when the state Division of Historical Resources determined the school would be eligible for listing on the state historical register. The first attempts by the school district to demolish it came in 2001 and 2002 when it appeared as a nonmoney article on the school district warrant.

In 2006, the Save Our Gale School Committee was formed and efforts to preserve the building began in earnest. News accounts at the time from area newspapers including The Laconia Daily Sun, indicate that most members of the school board and Superintendent Mike Cozort were against preserving it.

Officials said the Belmont Fire Department considered the building a fire hazard and school officials said it was preventing the district from using the property. As of this year, there isn't a proposed use for the land under the building, and Fire Chief Sean McCarty said this week that "any building that is not used or up to code is considered a fire hazard."

The years 2006 through 2008 are filled with newspaper records of a number of meetings held with the committee and the historical society, the planning board and the board of selectmen. The Save Our Gale School Committee also began fundraising, using spaghetti dinners and sales of T-shirts depicting the Gale School, along with other paraphernalia.

Other Belmont preservationists, like Linda Frawley and Wallace Rhodes, consider the Gale School as part of the Village District and have advocated for its preservation. In 2010, it was considered worth saving by participants in the Plan New Hampshire charrette.

In 2013, the Save Our Gale School Committee asked the town to consider moving the building to the corner of Concord Street and using it as a library. Library trustees nixed the idea for many reasons, with the primary one being that a library must be open to all of the public, and school property, for safety and other reasons, cannot. They also cited the terms of the existing library, which is in the Village District, and the restrictions on the trust funds used to support and maintain it.

In 2014, the school district presented a \$43,000 demolition plan and the committee came forward that year with an "anonymous" donor who volunteered to do all of the site work.

Last year, voters overwhelmingly voted to table an article on the school district warrant to raze the building for a cost of \$65,000 after former Chairman Pret Tuthill proposed giving the Gale School committee an additional year to come up with a plan for its use.



The Gale School in 2013