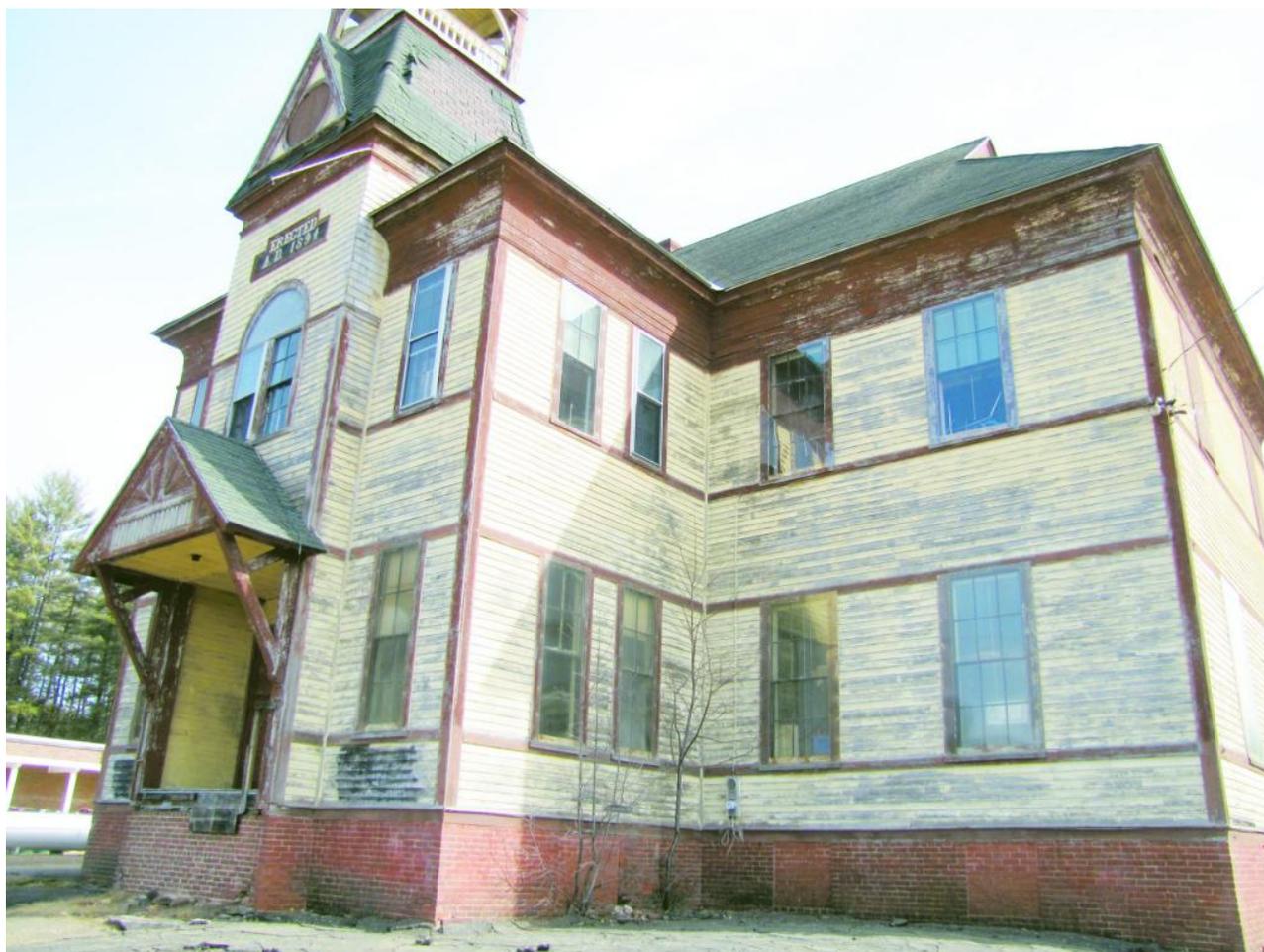




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Gale School saved from destruction



BELMONT VOTERS have approved an advisory non-binding motion which authorizes the Shaker Regional School District to transfer the Gale School building to the Save Our Gale School Committee and relocate it to school district property at Concord Street and Memorial Drive in Belmont. (JIM CLARK/CITIZEN)

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BELMONT — The old Gale School in Belmont has been saved from the wrecking ball.

Voters of the Shaker Regional School District on Friday defeated a school district proposal to raze the Old Gale School building. Instead, they approved an advisory non-binding motion, which

authorized the school district to transfer the building to the Save Our Gale School Committee, and relocate it to school district property at Concord Street and Memorial Drive in Belmont.

In effect, the decision gives the go-ahead for the Save Our Gale School Committee to move the building from its present site behind the Belmont Middle School, and begin efforts to restore it.

A warrant article, which would have raised \$71,000 in new taxes to raze the school, was defeated in a ballot vote, with 128 people voting against and 104 voting in favor.

The \$71,000 will instead be allocated to the Save Our Gale School Committee to move the building to the Concord Street and Memorial Drive location, and to partially fund its renovation. The school district property is less than one acre in size.

Warrant article eight, approved by school district voters Friday night, specifically authorized the school district to transfer the property and the Old Gale School to the committee, subject to the committee attaining status as a non-profit entity. The committee is required to attain such status by next year's school district meeting.

Diane Marden, chairman of the Save Our Gale School Committee, said her group already has attained a 501C3 non-profit designation.

Marden said she was "happy, dumbfounded and shocked" by the action of school district voters, and is relieved that a decision has finally been made to save the structure. She added, "I can't believe it's actually happening."

The Save Our Gale School Committee's efforts to save and restore the structure has been going on for almost 10 years. The committee was formed as a non-profit tax deductible organization.

Marden said about \$61,000 in services and material has been committed toward the efforts of the committee to save the Old Gale School building.

For the next year, the Save Our Gale School Committee will be involving in various fundraising efforts, including applying for grants which would fund most of the restoration process. Marden said about \$8,000 will have to be spent on the actual moving of the structure, about \$30,000 to rebuild its foundation and almost \$48,000 to replace the roof.

Marden also said her group will now attempt to have the building included in the National Historical Register, which designates buildings that have local historical significance.

It is expected that at next year's school district meeting, a warrant article will be presented which will make it possible for the Save Our Gale School Committee to officially take over ownership of the property on Concord Street and Memorial Drive.

When voters turned down the school board-supported plan to raze the building, and gave the go-ahead for the committee to take over the building and move it, the issue of keeping the structure at its present site became a moot point, and the warrant article was tabled. The school district meeting then quickly adjourned.

About 250 people attended Friday's meeting at the Belmont High School gym. It was clear that most of those in attendance were there to decide the fate of the Old Gale School.

The central issue, regarding what to do with the Old Gale School, involves what the total cost will be in moving and preserving it, and, given its historical and sentimental value, whether these costs are justified.

About a dozen people spoke on the issue, with no one in the audience in favor of outright demolition of the building. A major point of contention was whether school district money should be spent on a project that has no immediate connection or relevance to the education of students. In other words, should the school district be in the historical preservation business?

The Shaker Regional School District Board went on record as supporting the warrant article.

School board member Robert Reed said the primary obligation of the board is to protect the interests of taxpayers, and to serve the students of the district. He added that the total costs involving in saving and restoring the Old Gale School are still unknown.

Reed called the Old Gale School "an attractive nuisance," and said it is presently a possible fire hazard. Reed said that he completely understood the emotional attachment that local citizens have to the building, but in the final analysis, it was the opinion of the school board that it was fiscally responsible to tear it down.

Those who want to save the school from demolition said the building remains structurally sound and remains a beautiful example of Victorian architecture and Old World craftsmanship. They contend such a building simply can't be replaced, and tearing it down would be a mistake and a tragedy.

Marden and fellow Save Our Gale School Committee member Ken Knowlton spoke at length before the vote was taken Friday night. The committee maintains that the \$71,000 expended by the school district to assist the committee in the moving and restoration of the building will have a minimal effect on the local tax rate.

Marden said that members of her committee will be contacted within the next two weeks, and shortly thereafter, will determine what needs to be done in the next year as the preservation process goes forth.

She had words of praise for Roy Roberts, the school district moderator, in conducting the annual school meeting, and keeping the complex aspects of Gale School issue focused so that it could come to a final vote. Marden also praised the remarks of resident Woodbury Fogg, who spoke in support of saving and restoring the school.

With a decision now made to move the Old Gale School to Concord Street and Memorial Drive, the building could have a variety of uses when restoration is finally completed. It could be used by either the school district for various activities, as a community meeting place, or both.

The structure, which eventually became the Gale School, was constructed by Cyris Norris for the town of Belmont in 1894. It was later named for Napoleon B. Gale, a prominent Laconia banker in the mid-19th century. The Gale Memorial Library in Laconia is named after him.

Over the decades, the building served as an elementary school, and later included junior high and high school students. For many years, the Gale School was used for administrative offices and other purposes. In 1985, the Belmont Elementary School was constructed on Gilmanton Road (State Route 140 East) with the SAU offices transferred to the Memorial School building. Since then, the Old Gale School has been used exclusively for storage.

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