

Gale School survives Shaker School District Meeting (876)

By GAIL OBER, LACONIA DAILY SUN

BELMONT — After hours of discussion, ballot shuffling and confusion, the electorate narrowly voted against tearing down the old Gale School at Friday's annual School District Meeting.

The discussion on Article 10 centered largely on making a decision. While Ken Knowlton and Diane Marden made impassioned pleas to save the school, they both realistically said they understand that if the voters don't want to save the building and the School District doesn't want to, then it is time to give it up.

After a ballot vote, 128 people voted to save the school while 104 voted to tear it down.

During the discussion around razing the building, many had something to say, including former School Board Chairman Sumner Dole of Canterbury who, according to news accounts, was one of the people who initially wanted to save the school. Dole said it was time to make a decision.

Other spoke in favor of tearing it down and spending the money on the buildings the school is currently using. When asked by audience members why it isn't being used to relieve school crowding, Chairman Sean Embree said the overcrowding is at Belmont Elementary School and not at the middle school. He also said medium- to long-term future demographic studies show declining enrollments, meaning there is no need for space other than right now.

But many wanted the school district to find a way to give it to the Save Our Gale School Committee.

"Consider cutting (loose) that property ... let them have it," said one man who identified himself as from Belmont.

As a compromise, and in a nonbinding vote, the voters directed the Shaker Regional School District to either sell for a nominal fee or gift the Gale School to the Save Our Gale School Committee provided it gets a federal nonprofit 501(c)(3) status before voting day in 2017. Voters also said "yes" to having the school district give away the lot at the corner of Concord Street and Memorial Drive to the committee.

The making of this batch of sausage was especially messy, but it was Woody Fogg of Belmont who finally came up with the final wording of the article that amended Article 8 which included giving the Save Our Gale School Committee, gifting or selling for a dollar the lot at the corner and giving it the \$71,000 the district wanted to use to tear it down.

The School District attorney said that, according to state law, no money could be spent on any project that didn't have any direct connection to the school. In addition, he said the School Board doesn't have the right to give away or sell any school property without proper notice to the voters and since giving it away was not part of the petitioned warrant article, the amendment would have to be advisory only.

With virtually no dissent coming from the School Board members at the meeting, Moderator Roy Roberts said it appears they were "getting the message."

Monday, Superintendent Maria Dreyer said that there are two key things that need to happen before the lot at the corner of Church Street and Memorial Drive could possibly be transferred.

First the Save Our Gale School needs to get its nonprofit status. Because the town adopted an SB2-type of ballot voting, she said the warrant articles for 2017's vote would likely need to be submitted to the school district or by the school district by the end of December so there can be the requisite number of public hearings before the

annual deliberative session.

Secondly, Dreyer said the School District has to do a title search on the corner lot. She said at some point in the past, the lot was donated to the school. She said she is searching the school records for who donated it, when it was donated, and if there are any conditions on the donation that would prevent the school from selling it for a dollar or giving it away.

In other annual district meeting action and elections, of 555 total voters, 415 re-elected Sean Embree of Belmont and 405 elected Jody Martinez of Canterbury to replace the retiring Jill LaVallee. Moderator Roy Roberts was re-elected with 474 votes. All three were unopposed on the ballot but William Caruso mounted a last minute write-in candidacy for Embree's seat.

Voters overwhelming chose to support the money portion of the support staff union contract, which will be about \$125,000 for 2016-17, \$74,000 for 2017-18 and \$73,574 for 2018-19. Those figures are based on current employments statistics but could change slightly when and if employees leave or enter the employ of the district over the next months.

A \$21,789,000 operating budget which is 0.9 percent greater that last year, was approved by a voice vote.

Voters also approved allowing the middle school to be used for summer programming and day care for eight weeks, as opposed to the current six weeks. The School Board had initially pushed back because of the time it takes custodial crews ready the school for the fall. Embree told voters the School Board is working on an in-district arrangement for the summer recreation and day care programs that could involve different schools.

Also, \$75,000 will be added to the Facilities and Ground Expenditure Expendable Trust Fund to eventually help pay for a roof in the future.