

Shaker voters rally in support of preserving the Gale School

by Donna Rhodes

write the author

March 09, 2016

BELMONT — After more than two decades of debate over the future of the historic Gale School, voters in the Shaker Regional School District finally had their say last Friday evening, when they overrode the school board's proposal to demolish the building and replace it with a storage shed.

With a total of three proposals on the warrant concerning the Gale School, the governing body opted to amend petitioned Warrant Article 8, which asked to move the historic building to the corner of Memorial Drive and Concord Street. To that they added that the move be funded by the \$71,000 that the school board's Article 10 requested to raze the building. That article was defeated earlier in the evening, when the voting order was rearranged to present the school board's proposal ahead of the two petitioned articles on the topic after.

When Article 10 was first brought to the floor, members of the Save the Gale School committee made passionate pleas to either move the building to a small, district-owned parcel of land on the corner of Memorial Drive and Concord Street (Article 8) or leave it in its current location and make repairs so it could be used as the SAU 80 offices (Article 9).

"We've been trying to find an alternate use for the building, a new position for it, whatever we could do to save this school," said Ken Knowlton. "We are committed to go out and get funds...As far as I'm concerned, this is a worthy cause."

Committee chairman Diane Marden said the group has accumulated \$61,000 in funds over the years and have many people willing to donate even more to the building's preservation once its fate is decided.

Besides the committee, several members of the public also spoke out to save the old school where many attended classes in their younger days.

School Board member Robert Reed defended their stance however, saying the board understands the emotional commitment many people have for the building but added, "It's our job to watch out for not only the taxpayers' interests but also the students we serve."

He called the Gale School an "attractive nuisance" whose position between the Middle School and Bryant Field inhibits growth and expansion of the district and felt spending \$71,000 to demolish the building was the best solution.

"We would save the bell tower as a nod to history but the board supports Article 10 to raze it," said Reed.

Belmont resident Brad Corriveau said there is more to an education than just what is presented in text books and felt that destroying a piece of the town's history was not teaching children anything positive. He encouraged the district to lead by example, quoting, "Even if it isn't easy, you do it because it is the right thing to do."

The voters agreed with him and all others and after a 96-130 ballot vote on the school board's proposal, they then moved on to discuss ways in which the building could be saved while still meeting the district's needs.

It was finally Woody Fogg who devised an amendment to take the \$71,000 the board was willing to spend in razing the building and use it instead to "raise" it up and move it to the corner lot on Concord Street.

In his amendment, there were concessions for both sides though. He asked that the empty lot be sold to the Save the Gale School committee for a nominal fee, however that sale would be contingent on the committee obtaining a nonprofit status by this time next year and then be responsible for moving the building in a timely



SAU 80 Superintendent Maria Dreyer presented retired music teacher Ray Craigie with the Champion of Children award during the Shaker Regional School District's annual meeting last Friday night. (Photo by Donna Rhodes) (click for larger version)

fashion.

Attorney Matthew Serge reminded voters that property transfer was outside the scope of this year's warrant so the amended article would only be "advisory" to the board, but with a deadline in place for the committee to act on the article, the details could be addressed in 2017.

By an overwhelming vote the article passed and Article 9, an option presented in the event Article 8 failed, was then tabled.

"I'm ecstatic about this," said Marden. "I want to thank all the taxpayers for their support tonight."

Earlier voting by the district saw all other articles pass with little discussion, including the \$21,789,000 operating budget, a collective bargaining agreement for teachers' salaries and approval for the Middle School to be utilized for eight weeks of summer programming for children.

In the balloting that took place over the course of the day, voters elected incumbent Sean Embree and newcomer Jodie Martinez to the school board, re-elected moderator Roy Roberts, and by a vote of 355 to 194 opted to change from an annual district meeting to SB2 balloting for all matters in the future.

At the start of this year's meeting, the school board also thanked its student representatives Carol Lipshultz and Sierra McIntyre for their service, and recognized Superintendent Maria Dreyer, high school principal Dan Clary and veteran elementary teacher Patte Sarausky who will all be retiring at the end of June.

Finally, the Champion of Children award was presented to former band director and music teacher Ray Craigie. In her presentation of the award, Superintendent Dreyer said Craigie is well known for his sense of humor, dry wit and quick smile, but most of all, she said, he is known for his dedication to children.

During his 28 years with the district, the high school band program not only grew extensively, but his musicians won many competitions on a state and regional basis. Craigie was also a co-founder of both the Lakes Region Music Festival and the Belknap Mountain Invitational Music Festival. As a coach, he took the high school's ski team to two championships and also served as the middle school's golf coach for seven years.

Former district employee Bob Harper was also recognized posthumously as a second Champion of Children.

Harper, who passed away recently, served as head custodian of Shaker Regional School District for 29 years, and was once honored as New Hampshire's Custodian of the Year. In the 1980's he initiated the Senior Breakfast for members of the graduating class, a tradition that lives on to this day.

Harper was also an Army veteran, owned and operated Harp's Market on Main Street for many years, spent eight years as a member of the Belmont Police Department and 32 years with the fire department.

"He really did a lot for this town, and we're going to miss him," said Reed.