

Shaker Regional School District voters approve kindergarten, pay raises

By DAN SEUFERT, Union Leader Correspondent

BELMONT – Money for a new district kindergarten and teacher and staff pay raises were among the warrant articles that passed Friday night at the Shaker Regional School District annual meeting.

Voters passed all the articles but one – Article 6, which asked for \$65,000 to raze the historic Gale School, the 1894 school that sits on a hill behind Belmont Middle School and has been used mostly for cold storage since 1985.

Article 6 was “tabled” by voters, who approved a feasibility study on the school, in which district officials are now tasked with looking at possible uses for the building, requiring officials to report back to voters at next year’s district meeting, said Debbie Thompson, the district’s business administrator.

Voters did not approve any money for the study, Thompson said.

“It will be up to the school board now as to what is done with the study,” she said.

The \$21.8 million budget passed in a meeting that took about three hours, with about 400 voters from Belmont and Canterbury present at Belmont High School’s cafeteria.

Article 3, the collective bargaining agreement reached between the school board and the Shaker Regional Education Association, was approved. It will increase salaries and benefits at the current staffing level, with a fiscal year estimated increase of \$569,188 for 2016, and \$513,464 for fiscal year 2017.

Also approved was Article 3, a petitioned article that orders the district to set up a full-day kindergarten for school year 2015-2016. The article originally called for \$150,000 for the new school, but voters upped the amount to \$403,856.

The school board must give final approval in order for the kindergarten to be established, “but the money is now there,” she said.

Voters also restored just over \$50,076 for a science teaching position, which had been recommended as a cut by the school board. Several speakers rose to support keeping the high school teaching position.

District officials said enrollment decreases required the elimination of the science teacher, but parents said the teacher was important to the future of their children.

“If the students are our garden, we need to water them,” said parent Katherine Lundholm of Belmont.

Parents also cited possible education uses for the Gale School, which was named for former resident Napoleon Bonaparte Gale, after he left the town funds following his death. The rest of his estate was given to the City of Laconia and built the Gale Memorial Library.

The future of the Gale School, its landmark bell tower and stately Queen Anne style roof, has come up repeatedly at school district meetings over the last decade. A “Save the Gale School” committee has led efforts to save and reuse the building, and most recently the team of former School Board chairman Pret Tuthill, Conservation Commission chairman Ken Knowlton and historic advocate Diane Marden.

The building is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, and received good grades in a recent assessment by structural engineers.