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TUESDAY

*Town and
school
think over
the future of
Belmont's
Gale School*

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B E L M O N T
— Sumner Dole, a member of the seven-member Shaker Regional School Board from Canterbury, told a group of community leaders last night that he feels that the joint Belmont-Canterbury school district's ownership of the Gale School represents an unfortunate situation where the district has

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what is really an "iconic Belmont" structure, and as such should be owned by the town instead of the two-town school district.

While Dole offered no specific solution about what to do with the aging wooden structure, he did indicate he did not think the district would ever be able to use the town's original public schoolhouse, and that it could work great as a new Town Hall facility if it were completely restored and renovated.

Board member Roy Roberts of Belmont agreed that the school board didn't see the Gale School as a viable part of its future plans but he did note the district has discovered that it would cost about \$100,000 to either demolish the building or move it to a plot of land on the corner of the Belmont Middle School (BMS) campus and Concord Street.

"So the district is clearly committed to spending \$100,000 right up front in any direction," he said.

Board members made their remarks during an unusual Planning Board meeting held in the Corner Meeting House. Besides the Shaker School Board, the planners invited the Board of Selectmen, the Conservation Commission, the Zoning Board of Adjustment and several other community leaders and officials to

discuss Belmont's current situation and what plans could be made for the future.

Planning Board Chairman Peter Harris said there was much better communication between the governing bodies and their staff members in recent years than there had been before and that meant things were moving in the right direction.

But some in the group of more than 30 people admitted Belmont still faced some significant difficulties.

One noted by Selectman Jon Pike was that some residents seem to attend the annual town and school district meetings and "the first word out of their mouth is 'no,'" he said. "They don't even let you finish your thought and the answer is 'no.'" Pike said he is amazed by the reaction whenever he attends the meetings.

In the last two years, voters have rejected the donation of free land for a new police station, a plan to build a new police station, a proposal to purchase a small piece of land across from Town Hall that could be used for future town facilities, and a \$500,000 bonding program that would have made safety improvements to the Shaker schools.

At the request of the Shaker School Board members, the group discussed the current status of the Gale School.

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The old wooden building, which was built in 1894, was used by students until the 1970s when it was converted into unheated storage space. For years it has sat between BMS and the old Memorial School building on an aboveground foundation.

Then several years ago the Shaker Board announced it would consider taking down the structure since it was in an inappropriate place, i.e., too close to the modern buildings for safety, and was too expensive to restore.

A small but feisty "Save Our Gale School" movement arose and so far it has managed to alter the board's position from possible demolition to somehow preserving the structure.

But so far the board has not been able to figure out a way to either convert the Gale School into usable district facility or find some other suitable purpose for it.

Dole noted that at this year's school district meeting voters supported a proposal to put \$5,000 in excess budget funds at the end of the school year into a reserve fund to restore the Gale School, which the board saw as a sign of support for maintaining the building.

In addition, he reported that a meeting with the Gale School committee recently had resulted in a shared opinion that the building be moved to the Concord Street site where it could serve as a "gateway" into the historic village neighborhood.

But funding what could be a \$1.5-million complete restoration would likely take some kind of public-private partnership," Dole said.

"Look, I'm from Canterbury and I can't tell you what to do," he said. "But

I think the Gale School is an interesting and valuable building... I think the Gale School is one of those Belmont icons and whatever you invest in it, it will give you a good return."

Linda Frawley of the Belmont Historic District Commission reminded the community leaders that it was about 10 years ago that Belmont served as site of Plan NH's first ever "charette" involving the Belmont Mill. Plan NH is a nonprofit organization made up of historians, architects, designers and other professionals; the "charette" drew together members of the organization and town residents who spent a weekend brainstorming about what could be done with what was then an old, nearly demolished mill structure.

As a result, the town eventually applied for a Community Development Block Grant, which was used to restore the mill into a community center.

Frawley suggested the town leaders invite Plan NH in for another "charette" involving the Gale School.

Conservation Commission Chairman Ken Knowlton, who is on the Gale School committee, said the only way the ancient school building would be saved is if the district, the town and a group of motivated volunteers got together on a "vision" for the building. He said the recent meeting of committee members and district officials had moved that idea further down the road but more still needed to be done.

Dole said he wanted the Gale School to be discussed at last night's meeting because the old building was going to continue to deteriorate unless something was done.

"Time is ticking on," he said. "The building is not getting better with age."