

Remediation underway at former Abby Fowler School

by Mike Lange

SANGERVILLE – After several delays and reams of paperwork, workers have begun removing hazardous material from the former Abby Fowler School in Sangerville.

“R.J. Enterprises of Brunswick is on site right now, removing asbestos and PCB’s,” Town Manager Ken Woodbury said. “A lot of PCBs were found in the window caulking.”

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), PCBs or polychlorinated biphenyls were commonly used in thermal insulation material until they were banned in 1979 due to health concerns.

Woodbury said that in his view, the best use of the building would be to convert it into an assisted living center for senior citizens. “Piscataquis County has the largest percentage of senior citizens in Maine and Sangerville’s percentage is higher than the county’s,” he said.

But construction of affordable senior housing hasn’t caught up with the state’s aging demographics, Woodbury noted. “If you’re on Medicare or MaineCare, there may be housing available, but not anywhere near your hometown,” he explained. “Why would you want to live in Sanford, for example, if all your family and friends are in Sangerville?”

Thanks to a combination of grants through the Maine Department of Economic Development and the Piscataquis County Economic Development Council and a local match, \$220,000 is available for the cleanup, Woodbury noted.

The school, which was built in 1959-60, was closed in 2002 by School Administrative District 4 due to declining enrollment.

There were two tenants in the building for a short time but the town discovered that the cost of maintaining the old school was higher than the amount of rent they were charging.

Sangerville residents voted in 2010 to have the building demolished, but later had a change of heart when enough interest was shown to repurpose the old school in hopes of finding a buyer.

If all goes as planned, the town hopes to find an interested developer by the end of the year and submit a letter of intent for a Community Development Block Grant in January.

The grant, Woodbury explained, would assist the developer by awarding up to \$30,000 for each full-time job created. These positions would also have to be filled by low and moderate-income residents, he added. “This is ideal for our area because training is available locally through the Piscataquis Valley Adult Education Cooperative,” he said. “This is an excellent fit for our labor pool.”

