

# Hawaii Tribune Herald

## Local News

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### Connections campus lacks permit

*Charter school students will continue to attend classes at Nani Mau Gardens facility*

by Bret Yager

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Nani Mau Gardens owner Ken Fujiyama has decided not to contest a county order to stop Connections Public Charter School from operating on his premises without a special use permit.

Instead, about 100 Connections high schoolers will continue to attend classes at the garden until the end of the school year. And Fujiyama will continue trying to get the permit, a process which he says has bogged down over the past two years.

County zoning inspectors evaluated the Hilo property Feb. 10 after receiving a complaint. The Planning Department ordered that classes cease by March 20, with \$100 daily fines accruing after that. But it then granted an extension until June 8.

The county requires special use permits for schools to operate on land zoned for agriculture. The 54-acre Nani Mau Gardens is located in the Panaewa Farm Lots. The Connections students, along with teachers, security and administrators, operate out of the old Salon buildings on the botanical garden grounds.

The school has used the secondary campus for the past five years. The main campus is located in downtown Hilo.

Fujiyama had originally planned to contest the county's Feb. 17 notice of violation and order. The Hawaii County Board of Appeals was set to take up the matter Friday, but Fujiyama withdrew the petition.

"We'll just try to let the school end the year without contesting it," Fujiyama said. "Technically, we're in violation; I admit that. It's just that the (permitting) process has gone on so long, and I wanted to help the school out."

Fujiyama said student health and safety was never put at risk.

"The issue was just that we didn't get the permits in time," he said.

Fujiyama said he has a backup plan where the kids could probably be put somewhere else next year if the permit doesn't go through in time.

"You have to look at the kids in this," Fujiyama said. "They're all excited. They're like one big clique; they're not factionalized. And some of these kids are the ones the regular schools don't want to pay attention to."

Connections Principal John Thatcher said there is a lack of clarity on how to proceed with the permitting.

"We're working with the county and the mayor trying to work this out in a positive manner," Thatcher said.

Under-funded charter schools have had to scramble to find facilities for their students, Thatcher said. With a 20 percent reduction in the charter schools budget this year, paying for suitable facilities has become even more of a challenge, he said.

"Charter schools don't have facilities funding like other public schools do," he said. "The Constitution says the state needs to provide facilities, and only once, three years ago, did we have facilities funding included in our budget. Ken was gracious to rent us property over there we can afford."

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