

# Hawaii Tribune Herald

## Local News

---

### Connections charter school plans campus in Kaumana

by **Bret Yager**  
**Tribune-Herald Staff Writer**

Published: Tuesday, August 25, 2009 9:13 AM HST

Connections Public Charter School is laying plans for a new consolidated campus on the slopes above Hilo.

The school is seeking a lease on 72 acres of state land in Kaumana, where it wants to bring together its elementary, middle and high schools, plus add agricultural programs and student dormitories.

The campus would be built out over the next decade, starting with a low-cost plan to establish an area where the school can offer agricultural classes on the property -- something the school has wanted to do for a long time but lacked the space for, Principal John Thatcher said.

Full buildout isn't expected until 2021, according to a draft environmental assessment, which lays out plans for six project phases, with agriculture facilities ready in time for the start of class next fall, followed by dormitory and caretaker's residence in 2011 and the high school in 2012.

A new law passed in the last session of the Legislature allows charter schools to seek funding for facilities each year. The school is just beginning to explore grant opportunities and other sources of funding, Thatcher said.

"The priority right now is to get the lease," he said.

The state Department of Land and Natural Resources has given the school a green light to proceed with studies of the land, with an eye to a 65-year lease. A draft EA was completed Aug. 8, and a 30-day public comment period on the plan ends Sept. 7. The EA found the project won't negatively impact the environment.

Connections must present its finding to the DLNR before the state agency issues a lease of the property. Connections has about 370 students at elementary and intermediate school campuses in the Kress Building in downtown Hilo and a temporary high school campus at Nani Mau Gardens in Panaewa.

Another 200 students are on the waiting list, but the new campus won't help the backlog. Connections is not trying to become a big school, and the project isn't meant as an expansion, Thatcher said.

The property, located just east of Kaumana Caves, is zoned agricultural. A special-use permit will be required for the school to operate on the property. Access would be off of Edita Street, with secondary access off Kaumana Drive.

Edita Street divides property into two parcels roughly equal in size. The upper campus would house the elementary and intermediate schools, administration, cafeteria and gymnasium.

Upper campus plans call for a 9,000-square-foot preschool and outdoor area, a seven-classroom elementary

school, a computer lab, greenhouses and a four-classroom intermediate school. The lower campus would hold the high school and a dormitory capable of housing about 30 people -- mostly students visiting from other states and countries through such networks as the Coalition of Essential Schools.

"A lot of students would love to come over and do work with our kids on science and ag-related projects," Thatcher said.

The agriculture program will teach small-scale, sustainable cultivating and the raising of livestock.

The high school is planned to have nine classrooms, along with art, music and science labs and a library and resource center.

Clusters of small, single-story buildings scattered in the natural terrain will lend a "school in the forest" or village-like aspect, with walking and equestrian trails. Aiming for a "green" school, Connections plans for the buildings to have at least a silver Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating.

E-mail Bret Yager at [byager-@hawaiitribune-herald.com](mailto:byager-@hawaiitribune-herald.com).

Copyright © 2009 - Hawaii Tribune-Herald

[\[x\] Close Window](#)