

Connections charter school faces more delays

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The Connections Public Charter School's plans for a new campus faced another setback on Friday.

The Windward Planning Commission, after hearing testimony from 68 people in a room packed with schoolchildren, delayed approving a special permit for the project.

The permit would be one of the last steps needed for the school to break ground for the campus on state land near Kaumana Drive after seven years of planning.

Most of the people testifying are would-be neighbors to the campus, and opposed the \$30 million project over concerns of increased traffic on the narrow, windy road.

Agreeing with some of their concerns, the five-member commission directed the school to pursue an alternate access route from Puainako Street and provide an estimate for water consumption by its Dec. 6 meeting.

"I want to know when this road will get safer, slower and wider," Robert Wyman told the commission during public testimony.

His comments reflected those of many others at the meeting, who feel that the plan for the 380-student school doesn't fit well in an area already serviced by several.

"Nobody that I know is opposed to you," Terrance Yoshioka assured the about 100 Connections school children present.

"Basically, I want you to understand this is an opposition to the location of the school."

Dakota Helfrich, a senior at Connections, made the case for the school from a student's perspective.

Helfrich said Connections has had a positive impact on her, and provides the kind of support absent from most traditional public schools.

"Students who are treated with kindness, respect and tolerance will feel inclined to pay it forward," she said, calling it a "model for the future."

Under the current plan, the campus would be located on 70.15 acres of state land accessed by Edita Street, which connects to Kaumana Drive. It would host Connections' K-12 students, located at two makeshift campuses at the Kress building in downtown Hilo and at Nani Mau Gardens in Panaewa.

Connections Principal John Thatcher said the property is ideal for providing sustainable agriculture and forestry programs, which would offer a unique curriculum for the students. About half of the land would be undeveloped.

He objected to the perception that the school was not listening to the community after hosting

several meetings and changing its development plans to avoid impacting the caves under some of the property.

But Thatcher said he is willing to do amend the plan again to alleviate ongoing concerns over traffic impacts, even if that means working out a new access route from Puainako Street.

“We’re willing to do it,” he said. “We’re willing to do anything.”

That route would cross property not controlled by Connections, but the commission felt a new subdivision proposed nearby could provide that access if the developer is willing to accommodate.

Last month, the Board of Land and Natural Resources fined Connections \$500 for unauthorized clearing and fencing on the proposed site, which it leases from the state.

The school hired a contractor to build a fence in July on the land, it said, to keep it from being used for illegal activity.

That included a marijuana grow, which was handled by police.

The state objected to the fence, saying it was not authorized, and the clearing of ohia trees in the process.

Thatcher said the school did not tell the contractor to remove the trees, but the action nonetheless continued to sour its relationship with nearby residents.

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