

Connections charter school may be fined

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The Connections Public Charter School is facing fines for its new proposed campus in Hilo and what its attorney calls “harassment” and “bullying” tactics by some of its opponents.

The state Land and Natural Resources board on Friday will consider the fines, which could total more than \$5,000, for unauthorized land clearing and fencing that occurred last July on state property the school is leasing near Kaumana Drive to eventually build the proposed campus.

Connections Principal John Thatcher said the school hired a contractor to build a fence at the request of some nearby residents concerned over use of the property to grow marijuana or for hunting.

But, according to DLNR, the work was not authorized and resulted in several ohia trees being cut and possibly harvested.

The agency is requesting a \$5,000 fine plus \$540 for administrative costs and the authority to levy additional fines if found necessary. The school would also be required to remove the fence.

Thatcher said he thought a fence could be built since the school had a lease for the land and that the additional land clearing was unexpected.

“We thought that since the check was cashed ... we had the lease” and authority, he said.

The new campus would allow Connections to consolidate its two locations — the Kress building, which hosts its K-6 classes in downtown Hilo, and a temporary high school campus in the Nani Mau Gardens in Panaewa.

The new school would host all 380 students as well as a gym, horse barn, and programs for sustainable agriculture and forestry conservation on the 70.15-acre site. Additionally, dormitories would be built to house international students participating in the agriculture and forestry programs.

If approved, construction would begin in 2014, with classes starting as early as 2015. The campus would be built in phases over 16 to 25 years.

Attorney Ted Hong, representing the school, said the fine wouldn’t delay the \$30 million project, though the money would impact the school’s operations. He said Connections would seek reimbursement from the contractor.

The Windward Planning Commission will consider authorizing a special permit on Nov. 9. The permit would be the project’s final regulatory hurdle and allow construction to begin.

Hong said he doesn’t think any fines should impact the commission’s decision.

“We were the victims of a crime,” he said. “We didn’t know what they were doing.”

Hong also said Connections has been victimized by the posting of bumper stickers, reading “No

Connections in Kaumana,” at the Kress building last Thursday.

He said the school is considering it a criminal matter and is offering a \$500 reward for any information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person or people involved.

“School children should not have to come to school with this kind of harassment slapping them in the face every morning,” Hong said, also referring to signs protesting the project that were, according to him, intentionally posted along school bus routes.

Locks to the gate at the property also have been glued shut, Thatcher said.

Signs opposing the project have sprung up in front lawns near the site over the last few months.

Two nearby residents, both speaking on the condition of anonymity, told the Tribune-Herald on Monday that they are concerned about traffic impacts.

The school would be accessed by Edita Street, a partially developed residential area.

“I’m not opposed to the school in principal,” said one man, adding he’s “on the fence” about the project. “I am opposed to the level of planning and infrastructure development required for the school.”

Another man, who had a yard sign protesting the project, said, “I believe a lot of people who moved up here ... want it secluded and quiet. It will change everything.”

Thatcher said traffic wouldn’t be significant with one or two buses, on top of other traffic generated by parents and staff, going to the school in the morning and evening.

A turning lane at the intersection of Edita Street and Kaumana Drive would be built, he said.

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