

Panel poised to nix charter school plan | Hawaii Tribune Herald

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The Windward Planning Commission was poised Thursday to give the Connections Public Charter School a failing grade for its Kaumana campus proposal.

After citing concerns over traffic impacts and water availability, the five commissioners appeared ready to decline a special permit for the \$30 million project.

But the vote got hung up over a procedural rule requiring members to have missed a meeting on a subject to have time to catch up on testimony.

Two members had missed a meeting each recently, leaving the motion to deny on the floor until the Feb. 7 or March 7 meetings.

But that will likely not be the end of the issue.

Connections Principal John Thatcher said he planned to appeal the decision to Circuit Court if the permit is denied.

Thatcher said he believed the proposed site off Edita Street to be ideal for Connections concept of blending agriculture and a traditional curriculum.

The campus would be built in phases over a decade on 70.15 acres of state land near Kaumana Drive. It would host Connections' 350 K-12 students, located at two makeshift campuses at the Kress building in downtown Hilo and at Nani Mau Gardens in Panaewa.

It would also have dorms for international students and agricultural facilities.

Another site would not be considered, Thatcher maintained.

"We invested five years and a considerable amount of money into that location," he said.

Overall, the commissioners praised Connections' educational programs but said they didn't feel it wasn't a good fit for the neighborhood, with traffic impacts to Kaumana Drive being most frequently cited.

"We're not against the school," said Commissioner Ronald Gonzales. "It's the wrong spot."

Commission Chairman Dean Au, the only one to say he was on the fence, said the neighbor's concerns need to be considered.

"It's not easy to swallow," he said.

Thatcher expressed frustration over opposition in the Kaumana community, where he lives, and alleged that it was influencing the commission's position.

Opposition has been strong, with residents putting signs protesting the project in their yards and charging that traffic from the school would negatively impact their community.

For some in Kaumana, Connections has been viewed more as an aggressive developer than as an educational organization.

“From them, there’s no aloha here,” Kaumana resident Layne Novak told the commissioners.

Thatcher referred to opposition as being driven by a “not-in-my-backyard” mindset, and dismissed claims that the school would have a significant impact on traffic or the residential area in general.

“It’s really sad when you come to the point a school is an undesirable part of a community,” he said.

Previously, the commission had directed Connections to seek an alternative access route but talks with a nearby developer for access have not been fruitful, Thatcher said.

Planning Director Bobby Jean Leithead Todd criticized both sides of the issue, calling statements that the school would lead to burglary and theft in the community inappropriate but also referring shortcomings of the proposal.

“Neither side has put their best foot forward,” she said.

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