

Proposed charter school moves forward

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September 21, 2012

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Connections Public Charter School's plans for a new campus are coming closer to reality.

The Hilo-based school has submitted a special permit request with Hawaii County to build the campus on state land near Kaumana Drive.

The 70.15-acre site, accessed by Edita Street, would host classrooms for the school's approximately 380 K-12 students, currently split up at two locations, a gym, dorms, and programs for sustainable agriculture and forestry conservation.

The state Department of Land and Natural Resources has given the OK for a long-term lease of the property, according to the school's permit application filed with the county Planning Department.

The \$30 million project would next need approval from the Windward Planning Commission before the school can move ahead with construction.

Connections referred all comment to its attorney, Ted Hong, who said he is hopeful the project could be on the commission's agenda as early as November. The permit application was submitted in July.

If approved, construction would likely begin in 2014, he said. Classes could start as early as 2015.

The campus would be built in phases over 16 to 25 years, according to the permit application.

"It gives them new opportunities," Hong said of the project, adding that Connections is not seeking to expand the number of students it serves.

Instead, the campus would be geared toward improving the education it offers, partly by providing sustainable agriculture and forestry programs on the land, about half of which will remain undeveloped.

In addition, it would also have a horse barn, green houses, an "intergenerational facility" that would provide elderly and child care, and playfields.

"It's part of their overall philosophy," Hong said. "This project will allow them to do more hands-on and more specific types of programs ..."

"Nobody is doing the upland forest-type of conservation classes," he later added.

"To actually do that you have to go to the university."

The 30-person dormitory would be used to house international students participating in the agriculture and forestry programs during the summer, Hong said.

Connections, started in 2000, is located at the Kress building downtown where it hosts kindergarten through eighth grade and a temporary high school campus in the Nani Mau Gardens in Panaewa.

Other than doing its own fundraising, Hong said Connections is seeking funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other sources to complete the project.

It's not the only school on the Big Island looking to expand.

Innovations Public Charter School filed for an amendment to its special permit in July to expand its campus in Kona.

According to the application, the school at 75-5815 Kaahumanu Highway would increase from 200 students to 350 and from 5 acres of land to about 9.

"We're really hoping to serve the great need that we have," said Innovations Director Jennifer Hiro.

Hiro said Innovations wants to become a full K-12 school.

The \$2.9 million project would provide an amphitheater/pavilion, playfield and eight classroom buildings, she said.

"We hope to fully develop our middle school program," Hiro said, "be able to really property facilitate resources such as art and drama, some mentorship programs and apprentice programs."

A loan from USDA has covered the cost, she said.

The school's application will be considered by the Leeward Planning Commission.

No date has been set for consideration, Hiro said.

If approved, the project would likely take six years to complete, she said.

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