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Charter school project advances
Opponents have 30 days to challenge environmental assessment

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After a yearlong delay for redesign, Connections Public Charter School is moving forward with its master plan for a $20 million, 90,000-square-foot campus on state land in upper Hilo.

"This is really going to be an example of how a school can be built 'green,'" said Connections Principal and CEO John Thatcher.

The state Department of Land and Natural Resources has found the proposed project will have no significant environmental effects, according to its review of a final environmental assessment published Monday in the state's monthly Office of Environmental Quality Control Newsletter.

That publication started the 30-day period to make a legal challenge to the EA's findings.

Next up will be convincing the state Board of Land and Natural Resources to approve a 65-year lease for the land. The 72.4 acres comprises two parcels split by Edita Street off of Kaumana Drive.

"If there are no new comments, staff will then request the land board to issue Connections Charter School a new lease," Deborah Ward, DLNR spokeswoman, said in an e-mail. "At this point it's too early to say when the request will come before the land board."

Thatcher said he's hoping that occurs next month.

A draft EA completed last year triggered concerns about potential impacts to Kaumana Cave, which runs under the property.

To avoid impacting the cave system, the project was reconfigured to locate the campus buildings on the parcel below Edita Street, Thatcher said, noting that process took a year to complete.

Opened in August 2000, Connections now teaches 250 students in kindergarten through eighth grade at downtown Hilo's Kress Building, which is owned by the school's affiliated nonprofit -organization, he said.

Another 120 high school students attend a temporary campus Connections leases in the Nani Mau Gardens in Panaewa.

"We're going to save a substantial amount of money when we start moving up there," Thatcher said of the new campus.

Thatcher offered his appreciation to gardens owner Ken Fujiyama for the modest rent of less than 50 cents a square foot.

Besides saving money, the new campus will allow for the elementary, middle and high schools to be combined on one campus.

Also planned are a cafeteria, gymnasium, a preschool facility, and a 30-bed dormitory for international students.

Thatcher said there's demand to house visiting students from Korea, Japan, India and the mainland.

"A lot of people want to come to the Big Island because of the opportunity for learning here," he said of the island's unique natural environment.

Estimating it will take between five and 20 years to complete all the construction, Thatcher said the project will seek to obtain a gold Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design or LEED rating by using solar panels, its own sewage-disposal system that won't add to Hawaii County's system, water catchment for agricultural irrigation, and on-site trees for construction materials.

"From an overall design concept, the proposed campus is intended to be a school within a forest," according to the EA.

Hand-clearing of trees and other vegetation will be done to lessen the environmental impact, Thatcher said.

"We're not going to just come in and bulldoze everything," he said.

Once slated for development, the upper property instead will be used for forestry and conservation, Thatcher said.

"I'd say we're probably looking at $20 million over the life of it, at least," he said of the estimated development cost.

"So, we will be actively fundraising, probably starting next week," Thatcher said Monday.

Besides private donations, Connections may be eligible for federal money, he said.

"We don't expect the state to fund the whole project," he added.

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