

2008 Newsmaker of the Year: A Key Biscayne High School

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Over the past 12 months, the idea of a public high school on Key Biscayne has evolved from a fond dream among local parents to a very real concept that the Village Council is committed to voting on this summer.

The initiative has gone through several incarnations like convincing the City of Miami to provide space on Virginia Key or building a full-scale school near the Key Biscayne K-8 Center— before settling at its present state of a municipal charter high school that could rely at least in part on existing facilities.



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while private schools are expensive and even further from the Key.

They also pointed to the Village's property tax contribution some \$52 million to the School District as proof that Key Biscayne isn't getting enough bang for its buck.

So, throughout 2006 and 2007, Village officials made their case to the School District, and to the City of Miami as it drafted a master plan for Virginia Key, which is mostly City-owned land. Early versions of the master plan did make mention of educational facilities, but local parents and leaders quickly grew weary of relying on an outside entity for providing a school location.

K-8 Center site

As 2008 dawned, parents started looking inside the Village for a school location.

At a well-attended meeting in early January, school proponent Angel Martin said the grounds of the K-8 Center could be reconfigured to accommodate a high school.

With Mayor Robert Vernon and several Village Council members and officials in the audience, Martin pointed to the tax argument and sought Council support: "As a united community, led by our Mayor and Council members, we need to reach out to the Miami-Dade County Public Schools to assure the public education needs of our community are effectively addressed," he said.

Martin went on to describe a 55,000 square-foot facility with space for 400 students the number his group, the High School for Key Biscayne Stakeholders, expects would attend a local school.

Martin said the northeast section of the K-8 Center lot, home to nothing more than a parking lot and dumpsters, could accommodate an adequate two-story school -even better, however, would he using the north part of the compound, currently home to two old elementary school buildings.

He noted the elementary buildings are over 50 years old and in dire need of replacement. If they were torn down, he said, the land would accommodate both a rebuilding of the elementary school and a new high school — turning the site into a state-of-the-art K-12 compound.

But through it all, some things have remained the same.

The same committed group of parents is behind the effort, island teens continue to ask for educational options in their own town, and there is consensus among Village officials that the Key should get more for the millions of dollars in tax money it pumps into to the Miami-Dade County Public School District.

With all those issues swirling around the community, a Key Biscayne high school is the obvious choice for Islander News "Newsmaker of the Year" — and it promises to remain a big story throughout 2009, with a public input process and Council decision pending during the next 12 months.

Background

While the high school initiative in its current form really took off in 2008, the desire for a school is decades old and got its most recent revival in 2006, when then-Mayor Robert Oldakowski made it a focal point of his State of the Village Address.

At the time, Oldakowski and others were eyeing Virginia Key as the ideal location for a school to serve Key Biscayne teens, as well as their peers in Coconut Grove, Brickell and other nearby communities.

They argued the Village's feeder pattern public high school, Coral Gables High, was overcrowded and presented too long a commute;

But at a Council meeting a couple weeks later, a new group of residents emerged to fight that concept.

A group of homeowners led by Raul De la Heria said they back a local high school 100 percent, but support Virginia Key as the location. They argued the K-8 Center site is already vastly overcrowded, and adding a high school would bring more traffic, parking and activity too close to single family homes.

"We want a high school for Key Biscayne students, but we think Virginia Key is the best site, and we think the Village Manager and every resident has to work for that," De la Heria said.

Municipal charter high school

Despite De la Heria's group's concerns over location, the Council agreed to explore the Stakeholders' suggestion, directing Village Manager Chip Iglesias to hire a consultant to help study the new idea of a municipal charter high school — one the community would help operate and possibly sponsor.

Council member Michael Davey, now Vice Mayor, noted at the time, "We pay so much into the public school system, and I understand there are other needs, but the community is entitled to sufficient money to run a school. With a municipal charter school, we'll have the ability to do that, and I like that."

Despite the enthusiasm, the Council was cautious.

Vernon indicated the education process would be long, as the idea of a municipal charter school is one local leaders have little experience with. "We've got to do all our homework and see if it's feasible, but we're going to pursue it," he remarked. "We'll get all the facts and see where it goes from there."

To help the process along, the Stakeholders addressed a variety of Frequently Asked Questions.

They explained municipal charter schools are public schools funded by the state, meaning money local taxpayers already pay to the School District would be the primary source of funding. They added the school would be run via a contract between the Village and an independent governing board, allowing for more local input on curriculum, operations, extracurricular activities, etc.

"The school would reflect the needs of the community," the Stakeholders stated. "Education decisions would be made from within the Village, allowing the administration to easily respond to new trends and requirements without the constraints of the School District."

Education process begins

While that sounded good to many residents and Council members, key questions lingered — and most prominent among them was where the school would be located in land-strapped Key Biscayne.

With the K-8 Center idea proving controversial and Virginia Key viewed as too dependent on outside forces, no site immediately jumped to mind.

Even before selecting a site, Council members said they needed a primer on the basics.

"At this stage, it's really a data gathering effort to learn more about charter schools, how they function, how they work," Building, Zoning and Planning Director Jud Kurlancheek promised in March after receiving consultants' proposals. "We're still looking at different models from different communities."

By the end of April, the Council had selected a firm — Fielding Nair International — to help.

Charles Viscito, a school proponent and member of the committee that helped select FNI, said the firm is perfect for the Village's needs: he noted FNI takes a nontraditional approach to school facilities, and Key Biscayne can't have a traditional bricks-and-mortar school due to the lack of available space.

"If we think of a school as a building, we're not going to be able to put a 40,000-square-foot building in our community. We need to find a unique model," Viscito told the Council. "Fielding Nair's proposal was exceptional it really took it to a different level in terms of what we need to look at."

FNI promotes "schools without borders" — meaning students learn not only in classrooms, but by going into the broader community. While teens must still meet state educational standards, they do so through hands-on, project-based learning rather than lectures and memorization.



During one of the many meetings on the high school, Council member Michael Davey, now Vice Mayor, noted, "We pay so much into the public school system, and I understand there are other needs, but the community is entitled to sufficient money to run a school. With a municipal charter school, we'll have the ability to do that, and I like that."

According to the firm's principal, Prakash Nair, Key Biscayne is an ideal place to act on that philosophy — he said students could access a number of existing resources including the Key Biscayne Community Center, MAST Academy, Marjory Stoneman Douglas Biscayne Nature Center, University of Miami Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science and more.

Despite Nair's positive remarks, Council members remained curious about "nuts and bolts" issues.

Then-Council member Steve Liedman said cost figures for facilities, construction, operations, etc. are paramount. "The concept is wonderful, but we've gotta figure out what it will cost the community," he said when FNI was hired. "That's a significant aspect of how we move forward."

Despite the long road ahead, Council members and school proponents had made one thing clear — the Village wanted to control its own destiny in terms of a school, and that meant keeping the project 100 percent local. As Martin remarked, "We need to put Virginia Key to rest."

Concrete steps

Meanwhile, as FNI began its study, the Council took an even more concrete step toward making an on-island school a reality — in June, it agreed to file an application with the Miami-Dade County School District to open a municipal charter high school in the Village for the 2009-2010 academic year.

The action was somewhat controversial, with several Council members hesitant to spend the \$20,000 to file the application before finishing the education process.

Ultimately, however, they accepted Martin's explanation that an application is non-binding and simply "gets us into the pipeline" to open a school in 2009.

But as FNI's study continued over the summer, Council members' concerns grew, and they began to worry they didn't have enough information to move forward with the application.



A group of residents took a tour of possible locations that could partner with local high school in June. Locations they visited include The Key Biscayne Community Center, MAST Academy, Marjory Stoneman Douglas Biscayne Nature Center, University of Miami Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science and more. ([Read Islander News report here](#))

In August, the Council scheduled workshops starting in January 2009, sparking concern among the Stakeholders group, which had left a July Council meeting with the understanding that sessions were to begin in October 2008. Workshops would ultimately take place this past fall with more to come early in 2009 but that wasn't enough for the Council to feel ready to open a school for the coming academic year.

Indeed, in September, the Council suspended its application, but in doing so agreed to reconsider tiling for the 2010-2011 school year. Local leaders said the School Board was asking for information on site, budget, curriculum, operations and more that the Village simply wasn't ready to provide.

"I can unequivocally tell you there is no way that information can be provided at this point," Iglesias said, adding answers would require a public process. "They're decisions that have to be made by this community. There are some that will require a series of workshops to come up with a decision."

Still, school proponents were disappointed. Jameela Blumberg noted, "To give up on that hope and that dream by deferring the application is to give up on our potential; to give up on the greatness we have in our hands."

Added Rhonda Fuchs, "I think we have to get started. Let's not have fear, because fear only keeps us from moving forward. It paralyzes us."

However, Council members said they wanted to be cautious.

Everybody up here is trying to balance everything - it all comes down to doing it the right way," noted Davey. "My personal feeling is, let's be conservative on this."

Added Council member Jorge Mendia, then Vice Mayor "When you look at the responses from the School Board, we're nowhere near ready. It's an incomplete application with too many holes that we won't be able to answer for months.

While the Council didn't feel ready to submit a formal application, it was prepared to get specific about the public input process, scheduling workshops for October and November. As Vernon remarked, "It's in our best interest to go through this process and get the answers we've been asking, for ... after that, if it's in the best interest of the community, we move forward."

Workshops begin

With that in mind, FNI began its workshops, and dozens of residents made their voices heard. Through surveys and discussion, Nair and his team of consultants determined the Village is ready for an innovative, non-traditional school - but only to a point.

Nair suggested a sort of hybrid approach for a local charter school: students would certainly learn via projects in the greater community, but they would also attend classes in a more traditional building. "You're not ready for a school without walls," he told the audience at one session. "But you wouldn't have us here if you wanted to do what everyone else does."

Nair based his proposal on concerns expressed by parents, which largely focused on making sure teens at a nontraditional high school still meet state standards, learn the information they need to do well on college entrance exams and gain the skills necessary to succeed in higher education and the job market.

While the community finally had an idea of what shape a local school would take, several key questions lingered, and Village officials said they would likely remain unanswered until 2009.

FNI plans to issue a feasibility study sometime in January. The study will discuss whether it's possible to open a municipal charter high school on the Key, and, if so, where that school might be located. how it would be run. what specific curriculum would be used. etc.

The study will also provide specifics on cost figures.

More input

Even then, the public vetting process won't be complete.

The Council plans public workshops regarding the feasibility study, and is appointing a Charter High School Advisory Board to work with FNI on the continuing input process. Village officials expect the group and consultant to provide an unbiased assessment of the pros and cons of opening a local school.

"We're going to need people who are going to look at it not because they want their kids to go there next year, but are going to look at the entire global perspective of the Village," Mendia noted.

David agreed: "We need people who can look at the numbers and say, 'Is this doable?'"

But even after all that, Council members know they'll be the ones making the tough decisions next year.

Local officials consider submitting a new application to open a school in 2010 prior to their summer hiatus, which would allow the document to be filed with the School Board by the August 1 deadline.

By then, Vernon expects the Council will be ready to make an educated decision based on the desires of the community at large. "They will dissect the minutia of the project and come forward with their recommendation," he said of the consultant and committee, however, "It's ultimately the seven people up here that decide the fate of any big project."