

Council split on support of charter high school

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The Village Council is split on the future of the municipal charter high school initiative, with one camp stating the project deserves further review and the other urging an end to consideration of an idea it says isn't viable during tough economic times.

"I think we need to say: 'Great idea, wrong time,'" Mayor Robert Vernon said Tuesday, March 24, basing his comments on talks with leaders of several other South Florida municipalities that built charter schools. "We have to understand that we have a limited amount of resources here."

Vice Mayor Michael Davey, on the other hand, said the Village has a long history of beating the odds, offering incorporation and projects like the Village Green and Community Center as examples.

"What's frustrating me is that everyone says we can't do this. I don't understand why we're saying no right now. What we need to do is keep looking at this subject," Davey said.

In the end, Davey's position prevailed in a 4-3 vote, and the Council directed Village Manager Chip Iglesias to further review the economics of the project. Iglesias will report back in June when new property assessment estimates are in and he's had a chance to study school budgeting.

The decision came following a lengthy public comment session in which seven former Village Council members urged current elected officials to formally declare a position of "non-involvement" in the school initiative. However, school proponents took the opposite side, stating education is the most important issue a government can deal with (see related article).

"We have to be involved"

Davey was joined by Council members Robert Gusman, Jorge Mendia and Thomas Thornton in siding with the parents and voting to keep moving forward. The Vice Mayor said he by no means feels the Council is ready to make a decision on the school, but should once it has all the information: "We have to be involved — that's just part of the deal," Davey remarked. "We are the fiscal stewards here. We need to make a decision."

Furthermore, Davey noted creating a true municipal charter high school requires Village Council participation. He said the project must be a municipal charter, as only with a municipal charter, not a regular charter, can the Village be sure local kids get preference in terms of admissions.

Mendia, who put the discussion on the March 24 agenda, agreed there is a role for the Council, but was critical of the process so far. He feels a school feasibility study from consultants Fielding Nair International "didn't answer any of our questions, and probably raised more concerns.

"The one thing they did do is continue to raise the parents' expectations," he added. "As this process has moved, expectations of what is possible have continued to rise and rise and rise. We need to step back and decide what is true. We need to decide how we manage the expectations."

That means taking a realistic look at finances, Mendia said, pointing to a new flyer from

school proponents that shows a school he described as "Ransom (Everglades) on steroids."

He argued the budget listed in FNI's study couldn't possibly allow for that school, or even for desired programs like International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement: "The current budget proposes a very basic school," he said; not the world-class institution proponents talk about.

It was Mendia who made the suggestion that Iglesias produce some realistic, unbiased numbers and provide information on Village finances, including anticipated drops in assessed property values and unavoidable expenses like beach renourishment and sewer and water installation. He also pushed for a traffic study to detail whether a school would add to congestion on local roads.

Gusman echoed the call for more information.

"I think we need to study it a lot further. I don't think we've given it enough time," he said.

Meanwhile, Thornton argued the national and local economic woes should not put a halt to the process, as there could be external funding available: "I understand the economy is in horrible shape, but by exploring what grants are out there, there's nothing wrong with that," he said.

"The wrong time"

Vernon, however, said the economy is the very reason the Council should stop discussion of the charter school at this time. He agreed with Davey that Council members are the community's fiscal stewards — but in his eyes, that's an argument for ending the process.

The Mayor recently visited officials at municipal, charter high schools in Aventura, Pembroke Pines and Miami Shores, and was struck by an important similarity in what he was told: "They all said it's the wrong time to get into the charter school business," Vernon said.

School officials told him state funding, although it had been promised, is drying up due to budget shortfalls. "What they were told they were going to get, they're not going to get," Vernon said.

"When you rely on a revenue source that's \$7 billion in debt, you're making huge assumptions."

According to Vernon, all the other communities ended up needing additional funding to meet their school budgets. They had options — Aventura sells billboard space and Miami Shores relies on existing grant money — that Key Biscayne does not have.

Even if school proponents' assertion that the school will be self-sufficient proves true, he added, one thing is certain — the Village would have to pay to build the facility.

Unfortunately, he noted, the community is already committed to nearly \$6 million in water and sewer construction and \$2 million for beach renourishment. Taking on more debt for a school building — especially during a time of falling property values and tax revenue — could force the Council to make a decision Vernon doubts would prove popular among residents: "The only way to get the money in the public sector is to raise your taxes," he warned.

Council members Michael Kelly and Enrique Garcia agreed.

Both cited the "worst financial recession" in recent memory, and Garcia argued Key Biscayne

is a small community "that can't take it anymore" in terms of adding buildings and facilities.

"Every time we want to do something, what's our main problem? Space," he said.

Garcia suggested school proponents put their admirable experience and passion toward lobbying the Miami-Dade School Board for a facility on Virginia Key — one that could serve the Key as well as The Roads, Brickell, etc.; and provide ample space for labs, playing fields and more.

Kelly also urged a different path for school proponents due to economic and space concerns, and took it a step further: based on a suggestion supported by seven former Council members during the March 24 public comment session, he made a formal motion that the Council declare a policy of "non-involvement" in further school discussions.

Next steps

But in the end, the Council decided to stay in the game by directing Iglesias to report back with better numbers. They did not, however, take a step promoted by school advocates — appointing a Charter High School Advisory Board to produce citizen input.

"I wouldn't put a committee together right now," Mendia said. "It's just going to get the same expectations going up and up and up, and it's not going to give us the information we need.

"I applaud your passion," he told parents, "but your information is always going to tell us the same thing — to go forward. There are things that can be done by staff to get us the information we truly need. We could have it in six months, and then go from there."

Mendia, joined by Davey, asked Iglesias to produce a report that considers new Village revenue numbers, verified school budgets and other essential Village expenses.

Kelly, for one, remained concerned, noting school expenses are a very specific topic, and the Manager and Finance Director might not be qualified to estimate the cost of labs, extracurricular activities, IB and AP programs, etc.

"I think we'd have to pay someone to tell us what it would cost," Kelly said. "No disrespect to the Manager, but I want a qualified, unbiased opinion from an expert in this field to look at what a world-class Key Biscayne high school is truly going to cost."

Vernon shared Kelly's concerns to some degree, but said, "We can get better numbers than what we have. But you're never going to get numbers that are exact."

Iglesias expects to report back in June, when Miami-Dade County supplies the Village with new property assessment estimates