

Former Council members urge non-involvement in school issue

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Seven former Village Council members say the local government has no place in the education business, and are urging current elected leaders to pass a resolution stating their position on the municipal charter high school initiative as one of "non-involvement."

High school proponents, however, maintain there's nothing more important or appropriate the Council can do than provide education options for the keys youngest residents.

For their part, current elected officials were divided at a Tuesday, March 24, Council meeting — Mayor Robert Vernon said it's the wrong time to get into the charter school business, while Vice Mayor Michael Davey wanted to press ahead to make sure the project gets a full vetting.

In the end, Council members would vote 4-3 to direct Village Manager Chip Iglesias to come up with "unbiased, accountable" cost numbers regarding the project (see related article page 6A).

But for the first time in the public debate on the high school issue, a clear dichotomy is emerging among residents regarding the Village's role in providing educational options and whether a municipal charter high school is even a good idea in the first place.

A policy of "non-involvement"

Cliff Brody, a member of the original Village Council and a founder of a charter elementary school in Colorado, complimented the passion of parents who are pushing for a Key Biscayne high school. However, he said it is not the Council's responsibility to "plan, develop or operate a school... they should not be expecting Village government to do any of that for them. They need to do it."

Former Council member Mort Fried was even more blunt.

"Stop looking to government to pay for everything. There is no reason for this Village to fund a high school on this island," he said. "If those people want to do it, let them do it."

Brody cited his experience in Colorado as he urged the Council to be largely hands-off regarding the high school. In the Colorado project, he said, residents who supported The school raised private money, selected a location and alternate sites and drafted a professional business plan. Only at that point did they approach local government regarding a low level of involvement.

Brody believes school proponents should "stop lobbying the Village at a political level" and instead draft their own operating plan. With that — and private funding — in place, he said, parents could then approach the Council about a limited role for the Village in the project.

Until then, however, Brody asked Council members to direct Village staff to provide data when asked but pass a resolution stating any other role for local leaders is one of "non-involvement."

Former Council member Betty Sime Conroy echoed Brody's plea, and noted a total of seven

past elected officials share their stance. She added she doesn't see a viable location for a school within Key Biscayne, and doesn't think the project makes sense in the current down economy.

"I'm very opposed to us having to put out a bond issue for something like \$8 million, raising taxes in this economic climate. I think it's ridiculous and very unreasonable," she said. "I would like to see this municipal government get back to municipal issues without being so diverted."

She suggested the "very well-organized" school proponents lobby the Miami-Dade School Board for improvements at the Key's elementary school and a high school on Virginia Key.

Ex-Council members Martha Broucek and Steve Liedman made similar remarks, and Liedman had additional advice for his former colleagues: he said the Council should direct parents that the Civic Center Complex, which includes the police/administration building, fire station, Village-owned land at 530 Crandon Boulevard and Community Center, is off-limits for a school.

School advocates have mentioned a remodeled police/administration building and 530 Crandon as possible sites, and are currently promoting a plan for what is now the employee parking lot.

The former Council members who spoke last week mostly pushed for a formal statement of non-involvement, but a couple also voiced reservations about the high school project as a whole.

Fried said a local high school isn't necessary; that the Village's public high school, Coral Gables High, is an excellent school that sends graduates to top-ranking colleges nationwide.

Sime Conroy added a small school on the Key couldn't provide the opportunities high school students need to thrive.

"I hate to use the word inbred, but that is what does come to my mind. Children benefit much more by mixing in with other children from other walks of life," she said. "They grow academically; they grow socially and they're much better prepared for college."

Several members of the public joined the former elected officials in that position.

Location and financing were the major concerns cited by residents, several of whom said the bad economy makes starting a charter school a risky proposition.

Ed Sanchez, for one, said he feels most taxpayers would support a high school as long as it is not within the Village limits and would not increase property taxes. He feels tax dollars should be used for other priorities — such as beach renourishment, completing the sewer and water project, improving storm water drainage and adding onto the Community Center.

School advocates, meanwhile, defended the project along with their push to involve the Village government in the effort, including as a source of funding for school construction.

First and foremost, Angel Martin explained that municipal charter schools by nature involve the government of their host city. Otherwise, he said, the school would simply be a regular charter school —and as such wouldn't necessarily serve primarily Key Biscayne students. "If we were to do a charter school, it is open to the entire County," he explained. "The only way we can have a school for the children of our community here in Key Biscayne is through a municipal charter school, which allows them to have priority for getting into the school.

Charles Viscito agreed.

"I think it's been outlined what the difference is between a municipal charter and regular charter and why the Village has to be engaged," he said. "There's been no information at this point in time as to why we should stop the analysis and the due diligence."

Chris Blackman, meanwhile, made the case for the community providing funding and land. Blackman explained the rationale behind using the parking lot site, which he noted the Village already plans to acquire from Miami-Dade County. He said the site would accommodate a four-story building — two levels of parking and 25,000 square feet of usable space.

He estimated the cost of the project at \$8 million — which he said could be paid off in 15 years at a cost of just \$100 per resident per year. "This does not seem to be too much to ask of our residents," Blackman said. "Interest rates are low, our cause is worthy and we are in an affluent community."

Martin agreed, adding the school, once built, would be self-sufficient, requiring no Village funds.

Some new faces to the debate also supported Village involvement.

Margaret Crystal, a 34-year resident of the island, said students are exactly where the Village should be investing its resources. "I have no axe to grind; no family living in this vicinity," she said. "But I feel the children have the right to a good education, right here. We've spent a lot of money on many things — don't you think it's time we spent it on our children?"

Robert Duzoglou, meanwhile, thinks Village involvement would make for a better school: "If the Council has an opportunity to get involved in it, they should. I think it would only add to the community to have that element, and having some control over it would be a good idea."

Ed London, who served on an oversight committee for Miami-Dade Schools, remarked, "Quality education is a good investment. It's our future. It's the best investment we can make."

Meanwhile, Manuel Cambo offered a twist: He doesn't think the Village should back a municipal charter school, but should provide the land for a regular charter project. Cambo said his family has built several schools through an Education Management Organization.

He suggested the Council look into working with an EMO, which he said could fund and build the school as long as the community offers the land.

Pro-school speakers also defended the project in general and asked the Council to move

forward by appointing an already-approved High School Advisory Board.

Blackman cited benefits like more business for local merchants and a boost to property values, and said Key Biscayne's diverse population means students would have plenty of opportunities.

Meanwhile, London and Martin mentioned problems with Miami-Dade schools, including low quality, overcrowding and distance. Martin added the youth population of the Key is growing, and many local students would jump at the chance to attend a quality public school on the Key.

With that in mind, school proponents said it would be a travesty to simply end the process.

Viscito reminded the Council it passed an ordinance last October to set up a Charter High School Advisory Board. Since a feasibility study commissioned by the Village found the school project to be feasible, he argued, there's no reason to backtrack and not appoint the committee.

"Nobody's asking for you to approve a charter school tonight; what we are asking you is to appoint an advisory committee that you already established. If the advisory committee is set up with proponents, they can come back with a business plan and information in a very short period of time," he said. "I think this could be moved very quickly and very efficiently."

Then, Viscito said, the Council could take its next steps based on the committee's findings.

He hopes those steps will serve to resolve the differences that emerged at last week's meeting — Viscito, for one, is in favor of a referendum so the entire community can vote on the project.

Council decision

The Council, after a heated debate of its own, would ultimately decide to move forward with exploring the project. Although local leaders didn't take any official action on the advisory committee, they did direct Iglesias to provide more information about the school.

Iglesias said he'll provide numbers in June, after property assessment estimates are available and he has a chance to research budgets and costs for the high school.