

Charter school committee pushing for '09 opening

Islander News. August 28, 2008.

By Charlotte Miller.

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Steal a line from the 1989 hit movie *Field of Dreams* and make it more relevant. "If we build it, they will come..." is an apt phrase for the Key Biscayne Charter School Steering Committee. But much more than a mere field of dreams, the entire concept of the Key Biscayne Charter High School is taking shape as a viable entity ready to be launched in 2009.

Approximately 40 supporters attended an informational and interactive discussion meeting last week to view the recently-filed Charter School Application and talk about what the next steps should be. Angel Martin, who is spearheading the initiative, later said he was surprised those who have spoken in opposition did not attend. The committee wanted to clear up any misinformation that may be circulating, said Martin.

The meeting was an open discussion forum where community input was welcome and encouraged, noted Martin.

Before leading the discussion, however, Martin thanked committee members for the countless hours spent meeting, preparing and filing the 111-page application before the August 1 deadline.

"This was a significant challenge," said Martin. "With the committed members we have, we got it done in just a few weeks. I thank them for all they have done."

The Charter School Application Committee, headed by Leo Brito, has been meeting since June.

Miami-Dade County and the State of Florida require an application to open a Charter School be filed a year before opening the facility, making it possible to open on Key Biscayne in August, 2009.

"This is our intent. [but] it is not set in stone," said Martin.

Why a Key Biscayne Charter School?

"The community has to ask itself, 'Why

do we want to do this?" explained Martin. "For one, the community has shifted. It used to be a retirement community; it has shifted to one thriving with children. We have different needs now." A minimum of 640 children of high school age live in Key Biscayne. The last census, taken in 2000, gave a total of 10,500 residents. It is estimated that number is now 12,500.

"We have significantly changed," said Martin. "Enrollment is dependent on the high school student population. These numbers are a pretty good assessment."

In 2008, the Key Biscayne K-8 Center graduated 130 students; 90 of them were Key Biscayne residents. That means 90 children will be leaving Key Biscayne to attend high school. That may also mean parents are taking their retail business off the Key as well, explained Martin. A message from the Key Biscayne High School Steering Group posted on its website states, "... For an isolated island bordering one of the largest and most cosmopolitan cities in the country, sending our own retail business away from the Village is cause to wonder, from what school of economics have we been educated?"

Target population

The school will not import students from off the island for a Key Biscayne high school.

"This is a community school," said Martin. "This first target is the children of Key Biscayne. Second is to the siblings of those students. Third is to the children of staff and faculty of the school, and finally to employees of the Village.

"We will not be bringing in a lot of buses," added Martin. "The purpose is to serve the needs of Key Biscayne."

Brito, a stronghold member of the Steering Committee, told attendees there will be workshops to inform residents about what is going on, and to determine the feasibility and demand of opening a Charter School.

"The demand is dependent on how well parents are informed. Hopefully, you will all attend," he told those at the gathering.

Brito explained that once feasibility and demand has been established, the Village Council will likely send out a survey to residents asking, "If we had a school like this, how many of you would send your children?"

"That will determine if the Village will proceed for this year or at all," said Brito.

Enrollment is dependent on the type of school, and the type of school is dependent on what parents want, explained Brito.

"It is important we stay on top of this." The longer it takes to make a decision, the chance of parents making other plans for their children to attend schools off Key Biscayne increases, explained Martin.

The committee estimates there would be up to 125 students attending the first year, 375 by year five and up to 400 students between the years six and 15.

Vision

While the Steering Committee will rely heavily on community members to tell them what kind of curriculum is preferred, it stressed the importance of project-based learning by engaging children into society with knowledge and leadership. Civic matters and democracy, service learning and engagement to the community are important to our youth today, said Martin.

"We want to have one of the best schools in the country." "We have changed as a society," said Martin. "We are competing at a global economy. What is our critical advantage?"

Martin said leadership and academic growth with a reciprocal arrangement with the community would be ideal.

"We will make community partnerships with enterprises, financial institutions, rowing club, golf club, tennis center, athletic club, business leaders, foundations like the Key Biscayne Community Foundation," he said. "We have a tremendous amount of assets.

"School, family and community play a significant role in the development of children," said Martin. The school will serve all members of the community. It

will bridge the intergenerational gap between children and adults. Children and adults have a lot to offer each other. There will be many lifelong opportunities here."

Parental involvement a component of a successful Charter School

Parental involvement is another component of a successful Charter School, explained Martin, saying parents will be asked to volunteer at least 20 hours throughout the school year.

"A municipal Charter School as such — it is up to the municipality to decide [what curriculum they will support.] They ask us what we envision. They ask us how we will meet the state standard," explained Martin. "The final curriculum will be rigorous 21st Century learning."

Visioning workshops, scheduled for September, will be crucial in helping parents "vision" a school for their children, said Brito.

"We are looking for input and participation from the community in all the workshops," he said.

Brito added, referring to the Charter School Application, "We have 111 pages of open-ended ideas."

Show us the money

Key Biscayne pays \$51.8 million in taxes to Miami-Dade County School District. Some of that revenue will be returned to the community to support the Charter School. In addition, the school will rely on parent contributions, foundations and grants. The current Charter School budget includes operational costs such as books, computers and faculty and staff salaries. It does not include a facilities cost at this time, but does include a reserve fund that could be used for facilities.

"This is very feasible financially," said Martin.

Gas prices are at an all time high, noted Brito. "Gas will cost over \$1,000 alone just for 200 school days," he said. If parents contributed the gas money saved by not transporting their children off the island, it would be a significant amount of money. "Not that we think we are going to need it," Brito added.

Location

Committee members have come up with two viable locations. Option one is 530 Crandon Boulevard, the empty lot located between the fire station and SunTrust Bank next to the Community Center. The lot was used as a staging area for the beautification of Crandon Boulevard, and is now empty.

Option two is to offer the Key Biscayne Police Department space at 530 Crandon Boulevard and create classroom space in the under-utilized Village Hall. The two-story structure was built to support three floors. Both locations would provide a campus environment and will allow the facilities to become an extension of the community, said Martin.

"We want to make sure we have a place for our eighth graders to go the school next year," said Brito, "Whether they use this [community] room or the basketball court or rooms upstairs [in Village Hall] or rooms in the Community Center."

Next steps

Stressing the importance of involving the Village Council in workshops before December, Martin said, "We think outside the box. As a community we decide governance, management, parent support, community partnerships, student recruitment and enrollment. It is very critical that we get the workshops with the Village set earlier than December to give parents a chance to plan."

The committee hopes to begin student recruitment with a March I registration period.

Consultants Fielding Nair, REM Solutions and EdVisions have been working closely with Village Council and the Steering Committee.

Getting the word out

Attendees agree getting the word out about the Charter School effort is of paramount importance. Jill Stevens reminded fellow attendees of the deep passions that arose over the Community Center before it was built. "This is also a deep emotional issue," she said. "The future of our children is a deep community issue. We need to gather that momentum and that deep passion and go beyond what we are doing."

"This is a grassroots effort," said

Martin. "This is about calling your friends and telling them about what we are doing."

A message to the community

The Key Biscayne High School Steering Group posted a message entitled Children, Education, and Community in Key Biscayne that reads in part, "Although [child development professionals] opinions may present slight variations, they agree to [raise a child] well, it does take more than parent and school efforts. It takes a whole community to raise our children, and children to raise a sustainable village.

"Today's globally connected and competitive world requires an education beyond academic excellence. It entails other complements that will allow our children to exercise leadership and civic engagement that can only be put into effect within the context of a mentoring community.

"However, we have failed to provide our estimated 3,000 children of our village with the opportunity to attend secondary school within their community at some of the most crucial years of their educational and social development...."

The message goes on to state the economic and civic benefits of educating children locally.

Read the message in its entirety at www.hs4kb.com. The Charter School application and the Charter School budget, and a synopsis of last week's informational meeting can also be found there. Check the Islander News for upcoming workshop schedules.

Council defers workshop request

During a meeting Tuesday night, the Village Council deferred Charter School Steering Committee members' request to begin informational workshops in October.

The issue was deferred until the Council's next meeting September 9. Most Council members are opposed to ramping up the Charter School process citing a busy budget workshop season, lack of full voter representation and the change in two Council seats in November.

Complete Council coverage will be in the September 4 edition of The Islander News.

Note from the Key Biscayne High School Stakeholders group: information mentioned in this article can be located at:

Children and community: http://www.hs4kb.com/support_docs/Children_community_Key%20Biscayne.pdf.

School draft budget: http://www.hs4kb.com/support_docs/KBCHS_Draft_Budget.pdf