

Press Clippings 10/13/2017

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Community split on charter school

Officials consider next moves after vote to approve Elgin Math and Science Academy

BY RAFAEL GUERRERO



School District U46 CEO Tony Sanders and his team, left, and Elgin Charter School Initiative president Kerry Kelly and her team, right, attend an Illinois State Charter School Commission meeting last week. (Rafael Guerrero/Courier-News)

A week has passed since state commissioners approved a proposal to open Elgin's first charter school next fall, and members of the School District U46 community stand by their opinions on the matter.

School board members, U46 administrators and others working alongside the Elgin-area district spoke out over the Elgin Math and Science Academy, which will open next fall to possibly 400 students at the former Fox River Country Day School site.

"If it's the best thing for (the students), so be it," said Richard Johnson, president of the Elgin Teachers Association. "But the EMSA plan just doesn't seem to do it for me."

Johnson has spoken out about the proposal in prior meetings regarding the school commonly known as EMSA. He said the issues are still there — how will the school address special education and its potential of diverting around \$4 million away from U46.

The fact some commissioners said voting for EMSA was a risk was warranted, he said. The fact they still voted in favor was a surprise to Johnson. Commissioners for the Illinois State Charter School Commission voted 5-3 in favor of the proposal.

U46 school board president Donna Smith said the commissioners had the right to vote the way they chose.

"They make decisions like we make decisions," she said. "And they decided they would vote yes despite it being a risk."

Smith said she has not changed her mind since she voted no on EMSA in April and June. She said the second EMSA proposal was similar to the first attempt a few years ago. Smith's criticisms focused on the Elgin Charter School Initiative's perceived lack of preparedness on their proposal and presentations, and the school's budget, she said.

Lisa Hopp, a U46 parent, spoke on her behalf, not as the chairwoman of the district's Citizens' Advisory Council, about the many issues she has about the charter school in an email interview. She said the Expeditionary Learning model EMSA officials have touted may have been unique in 2014, but isn't anymore given U46's changes to its science curriculum. Hopp added the proposal was too confident it would receive the funding to fix the day school site, a cost she said is still uncertain.

She expressed disappointment in the state charter commission, questioning whether they had done their "own due diligence" on the proposal. Hopp appreciated the fact two commissioners who voted against it three years earlier still voted no last week, for seeing their concerns from the first attempt still go unresolved.

"It makes no sense that a school that has a goal of attracting and serving 60 percent at-risk students would start at 9 a.m., have no plan for before/after school care, have a lousy transportation plan, have a budget rely on majority of students paying full school fees and packing lunch, and only think they need (part-time) nurses and social workers," she said.

When commissioners voted last week, U46 CEO Tony Sanders and his team left the meeting almost immediately after the vote. During the hearing, Sanders told commissioners the EMSA budget changed several times, its curriculum did not properly address students learning English or those with special needs, and the day school site may pose a challenge in properly fitting 400 students and staff.

In a short statement Tuesday, Sanders said he still stands "by my team's review and I continue to have concerns with the academic, financial and facility issues that we shared with the commission these past few months."

"I will take my direction from the board concerning next steps, if any," Sanders said.

Board member Phil Costello acknowledged he has some concerns about the proposal, despite his support for the charter since the beginning.

Costello pointed out the school's finances and its path to getting 60 percent of its students to be from at-risk families — even the state charter commissioners pointed out the finances as a risk, he added.

However, the commission gave them a chance and said it was a risk worth taking, and Costello agreed. The move opens up the possibilities of more charter schools in and around Elgin — the only other one nearby is School District 300's Cambridge Lakes Charter School — whereas a defeat likely would kill local efforts for years.

"From the start, it was school choice," Costello said. "Parents should have options when it comes to where they send their kids to school."

He expressed hope the district and the charter group can improve their relationship because of what is stake: the well-being of children.

Board member Jeanette Ward maintained her support for EMSA this week. In a phone interview, Ward said she saw it as a victory for parental choice and that the competition among the schools would spur better outcomes.

Ward noted how the estimated costs for the school represent a small portion of U46's half-billion dollar budget.

"This is not U46's money, this is taxpayer money funding education, and funding following the student," she said at last week's commissioners meeting. "I urge the Illinois charter school commission to approve this charter school."

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Charter commission releases EMSA budget, appeal decision

BY RAFAEL GUERRERO

The budget that an Elgin charter school group presented to state charter school commissioners ahead of last week's vote shows first-year expenses at \$2.8 million, documents show.

More than a week after the Illinois State Charter School Commission granted a charter for the Elgin Charter School Initiative's Elgin Math and Science Academy, the commission made public its reasoning for appealing School District U46's rejection of the charter proposal, along with highlighting the school's projected budget.

In the budget, the charter group projects \$2.8 million in expenses, compared with just under \$2.85 million in revenue, projecting having a yearly surplus of about \$45,000, according to budget documents.

The projected expenses grow yearly after the 2019 fiscal year. According to budget documents, expenses would reach \$3.1 million in the second year, \$3.5 million in the third, \$4.1 million in the fourth and \$4.8 million in the fifth.

The increase in costs correlates to the expected increase in enrollment as the school, commonly known as EMSA, expands from just over 200 students in 2018 to 400 in 2022-23, according to the budget documents.

As previously reported, EMSA would get 100 percent per-pupil funding through U46, or \$10,368 per student.

The state commission unveiled its appeal decision via a 21-page document. Much of what is in the decision had already been said during the Oct. 3 meeting.

Commissioners and commission officials reaffirmed their decision to grant EMSA the charter to open next fall. They said EMSA officials were more than willing to modify their proposal to satisfy their concerns and those within the U46 community.

According to the decision, the modified proposal satisfies "community concerns about the significant debt associated with renovating and repairing facilities owned by the

City of Elgin, the Commission proposed and (Elgin Charter School Initiative) agreed to pursue private funds for any building outside of the Neill (sic) Building and unless otherwise approved by the Commission, the school would only occupy the Neill (sic) Building during the five-year charter term.”

Much like during the October hearing at Gail Borden Public Library, the commission criticized the school district’s handling of the charter school application process.

It called the U46 board’s 4-3 vote June 26 to reject the charter proposal “an inappropriate re-vote” of an April 10 vote that approved it, pending the approval of a contract. On April 10, the vote was 6-1 in favor of the proposal; some U46 board members and staff have said that vote was for conditional approval of the EMSA proposal.

“The substance of the charter school’s proposal did not change after April 10th,” the commission said in its decision. “Yet, on June 26th, the board voted to deny the (sic) essentially the same proposal it had already deemed worthy just months earlier. We can find no material difference in the proposal submitted and approved on April 10th and the one rejected on June 26th. And although the charter proposal did not change in substance, the composition of the board did. During the two-month period following the April 10th approval decision, an election changed the composition of the board.”

The discussion continued: “On these facts, it appears that contract approval was delayed until a new slate of board members was in place.”

At last week’s meeting, Commissioner Bill Farmer was one of a few who told U46 staff present that their tactic was questionable. “With respect to our compliance test, it is my perception that (School District U46) is not in compliance with the process and how they reviewed it following the timeline,” he said.

The legal team for the school district restated its claim the April vote was for a conditional approval.

“Both parties understood that the board would be making the final decision,” said chief legal officer Miguel Rodriguez.

In the commission’s conclusion, officials wrote, “EMSA has met the requirements of the Illinois Charter Schools Law and is in the best interest of students it intends to serve.”

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Elgin plans demolition at future charter school site

BY ELENA FERRARIN

Three buildings will be demolished, likely next month, on the site of the former Fox River Country Day School in Elgin, as a new charter school prepares to take over the property.

The [Elgin Math and Science Academy](#) expects to open in August at 1600 Dundee Ave., catering to roughly 200 students in kindergarten to third grade. The Elgin City Council approved a lease agreement for most of the 19-acre property from April 1 through June 30, 2023, for \$1 per year with an option to renew.

The lease requires the city to demolish two buildings, Allison Hall and Kilburn House; a third building, Cox Cottage, will be demolished on the city's portion of land, but the home of a police resident officer will remain untouched.

Six companies submitted bids from \$98,500 to \$344,000 for the work, a wide range that is not unusual for such projects, Building Maintenance Superintendent Rich Hoke said. The city council is expected to award a bid Oct. 25, and the contractor will finish the work in the spring with seed planting, Hoke said.

The city requested bid proposals last month, before the Illinois State Charter School Commission approved the charter school Oct. 2. That's because the three buildings had degraded so much, they needed to be demolished, whether the charter school came in or not, Hoke said.

The city will pay for the demolition with \$43,500 budgeted in the Riverboat fund, along with some of the \$400,000 in contingency money set aside in the same fund, city communications specialist Molly Center said.

No other expenses on the property are planned beyond routine maintenance and emergency repairs, Center said. The 2017 budget also included \$200,000 for roof repairs on the property; city officials will decide how to reallocate that during 2018 budget discussions, Center said.

The charter school initially will be housed in the Neil building, which was built in 2005 and has remained in good shape since the previous school closed in 2011, Hoke said. Other buildings have suffered various damage, such as a leaking roof over the pool in the gymnasium building, he said.

The plan is -- as students grow -- to expand into the gymnasium building and then into the administration building, said Kerry Kelly, president of the Elgin Charter School Initiative.

Shales McNutt Construction last year estimated the Neil building needed repairs of up to \$130,000, Kelly said.

During a site visit Monday, "the engineers were impressed with the excellent condition of the building and its systems. The next step will be to secure a general contractor which will bid on the repairs," she said.

The charter group will pursue financing from IFF, a nonprofit specializing in charter school financing that has already issued a letter of approval for a loan of up to \$1.5 million, Kelly said. The charter group also is promised \$950,000 in federal reimbursements for startup costs and was preapproved for a line of credit up to \$200,000 from Triumph Bank in Elgin.

"This property is extraordinarily unique and beautiful, and combined with our EL Education model, will enrich the lives of EMSA students and families," Kelly said.

Mayor David Kaptain said it's good the property will be put to use.

"I've always said, 'We're just the landlord,'" he said. "I don't have an opinion one way or the other on the charter school, but any time we can provide options for education in the community, it's a good thing."

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Student beaten by classmate sues District U-46, South Elgin middle school

BY HARRY HITZEMAN

The family of Henry Sembdner, left unconscious after a beating by a classmate, has sued a South Elgin middle school and Elgin Area School District U-46, arguing they knew the attacker was dangerous and that the school failed to provide adequate care after he was injured.

The suit states district officials and the Kenyon Woods administration knew, or should have known, of the danger posed by the attacker, identified in the suit as John Doe because he is a minor.

"Doe had a significant and lengthy history of behavioral infractions, including prior violent attacks against other students that resulted in physical injury, and was known by the defendants to pose an impending danger to other students," read part of the lawsuit, which seeks unspecified damages.

According to the suit, Doe assaulted Sembdner in February in a school hallway where there were no security cameras and previous assaults had occurred. Doe picked up Sembdner and slammed him to the ground headfirst, rendering him unconscious.

Afterward, the suit claims, the school nurse failed to provide adequate and responsive care to Sembdner, who was bleeding, and ignored a teacher's plea to call 911. Instead, the nurse called the boy's mom, saying he had a bloody nose and broken tooth, but "did not reveal the full extent of Henry's injuries or the fact he was unconscious at one point. In truth, Henry had sustained severe trauma to his brain and multiple fractures to his face and skull."

In the ensuing 45 minutes, Sembdner's eye bulged due to brain swelling and he became nauseous before the nurse called 911, according to the suit. On the way to the hospital he suffered seizures.

Doe, now at another school, pleaded guilty earlier this year to aggravated battery and was sentenced to a year of probation and 100 hours community service. He wrote an apology letter to Sembdner -- now in eighth grade at Kenyon Woods -- and is subject to random drug tests.

"We have not yet been served with the lawsuit and we don't comment on litigation," U46 spokeswoman Mary Fergus said.

A message left with Sembdner family attorney Lance Northcutt was not returned.

The lawsuit is due in court Dec. 21.

SPORTS

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FOOTBALL: Mr. Everything

All-purpose Segobiano keeps St. Charles North's opponents guessing

BY GENE CHAMBERLAIN

It's difficult to pin down exactly where St. Charles North senior Lucas Segobiano might start a given play on a football field. But the end zone is where he often finishes.

The senior running back's versatility has combined with quarterback Mike Hohensee's passing and a surging defense to put St. Charles North (6-1, 4-0) within two victories of its first conference title since 2004.

"Luke is a dynamic player, and you have to game plan for every single spot he's in," Hohensee said. "You can never go wrong getting the ball in his hands."

The 5-foot-11, 190-pound Segobiano has deployed this year on either side of Hohensee in the backfield, at slot receiver, at wide receiver, in motion and at safety. He lined up as a punter on a fake.

He's even offered guidance to the younger players.

"We had six juniors and a sophomore on the field on defense during one practice session," North Stars coach Rob Pomazak said. "And Luke was out there helping coach the kids up on their assignments."

“We’re so young there, but he’s been up on varsity since during his freshman season. So they were in good hands.”

Segobiano leads North in rushing with 647 yards, 70 carries and 11 touchdowns. He also leads in receiving with 29 catches for 483 yards and five TDs.

“It’s been a lot more running back and less slot receiver this year,” Segobiano said. “Last year, it was the other way around. I like it all because for an opposing defense it’s so hard to scout.

“And it’s fun because I get more touches and more yards.”

Segobiano is as difficult to pin down for tacklers with the ball as he is before the snap. He’s as likely to run through a tackler as run around them.

It’s all led to college attention for Segobiano, who has visited Illinois State. He has a roster offer from Butler, which doesn’t offer football scholarships.

“I’ve done this for 17 years and haven’t coached a skill player quite like him — and I’ve coached a few guys,” Pomazak said. “I think he’s one of the best players in the state of Illinois, and one of the top three I’ve ever coached.

“He’s a unique combination of linear speed, lateral quickness, and is very strong and tough-minded.”

Segobiano’s assorted deployments blend with Hohensee’s passing to increase Pomazak’s play-calling options.

“We’re pretty versatile, and coaches have wanted to stick with what’s working in a game,” Segobiano said. “When we played Schaumburg, we were able to run the ball all day. When we played St. Charles East, I had 40 yards, and Mike threw for 400.

“It’s just whatever works and what the defense is giving us. Even though, we had some bigger dudes last year, we’re more consistent this year. We haven’t turned it over as much.”

North hosts Geneva (4-3, 3-2) at 7:30 p.m. Friday and then Batavia (7-0, 4-0) on Oct. 20 with the Upstate Eight River title at stake.

“If we win these two, we’re going to the playoffs with so much momentum,” Segobiano said. “And at 8-1, with a loss to a really good team (Bolingbrook), we’d have a high seed.”

Segobiano’s role also figures to increase in significance.

“You know, I think Luke’s best games are still ahead,” Pomazak said. “He hasn’t even played more than a quarter and a half the last few weeks because we’ve gotten way ahead.

“And I’ve always known him to be a player who, when it comes to crunch time, has a lot left.”

It’s something more for defenses to consider when trying to stop Segobiano.

As if he doesn’t already give them enough to ponder.

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Boys soccer: Elgin High being investigated for using illegal player

BY JOHN RADTKE

Elgin High School's varsity boys soccer program is being investigated for using an illegal player this season, violating IHSA rules.

"I was notified this morning that Elgin High School may have an illegal player, violating IHSA bylaw 3.101," Dr. Terri Lozier, assistant superintendent for secondary schools in Elgin Area School District U-46 told the Daily Herald Thursday afternoon.

"I have opened an investigation and I'm working to get to the bottom of the situation."

Opposing coaches have identified the player in question as junior Omar Lopez, one of the Maroons' top players who has helped Elgin to a 14-2-3 season that included winning the Upstate Eight Conference River Division championship. The opposing coaches have provided credible evidence that Lopez has also played for the Elgin Pumas club soccer team this fall.

IHSA bylaw 3.101 states: During the school season for a given sport, in a school which maintains a school team in that sport, a student shall not participate on any nonschool team, nor as an individual unattached in nonschool competition, in that given sport or in any competition that involves the skill of the sport in question. Violation shall cause ineligibility for a period not to exceed 365 days. An exception may be made by the Executive Director under the guidelines adopted by the board of directors for competitions sanctioned directly by the National Governing Body or its official Illinois affiliate for the sport.

The violation, if proven, could cause Elgin to forfeit all games it won in which Lopez played, and it could affect Elgin's participation in the upcoming state playoffs.

"The IHSA is waiting for Elgin High School to complete its investigation," said IHSA assistant executive director Beth Sauser, who is the association's boys soccer administrator.

Messages left for Elgin High athletic director Paul Pennington and school principal Krystal Thomas were not immediately returned Thursday afternoon.

Elgin is the No. 2 seed in the upcoming Class 3A Streamwood sectional and is scheduled to open regional play at Hampshire on Tuesday against the winner of a Monday play-in game between Rockford East and Rockford Jefferson.

Check back to dailyherald.com later for more details, if they become available.

Steve Nichols contributed to this story