

RCSD board rejects group's plan to adopt School 33

Rejected

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An ambitious attempt to build up Rochester's EMMA-Beechwood neighborhood fell flat at the Rochester school board last week, leaving a hole in otherwise coordinated revitalization efforts.

The nonprofit organization Connected Communities had hoped to sign an agreement

with the district to adopt John James Audubon School 33 on Webster Avenue as a community school for the neighborhood, with nearby students guaranteed enrollment there. Connected Communities already has plans and partnerships involving low-income housing, economic development and health and wellness; the last missing pillar was education.

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It spent two years working with school leadership on a proposal, then made numerous revisions based on feedback from the administration and Rochester Teachers Association, Executive Director LaShunda Leslie-Smith said. The organization had secured a pledge of \$637,000 from the William and Sheila Konar Foundation to pay for an administrator at the school over several years to coordinate all its community relationships.

"We had worked through many iterations of the (memorandum of understanding) with the administration and then several more iterations with the RTA," Leslie-Smith said. "By all means, it seemed to be something all stakeholders were on board with, with the exception of our school board, apparently."

The resolution failed last Thursday in unusual manner. It initially passed by a vote of 4-3 with commissioners Cynthia Elliott, Melanie Funchess and Natalie Sheppard in opposition. They did not speak about their concerns upon voting no.

After the vote had been recorded, Board Vice President Willa Powell asked that the resolution be opened again so that the three dissenting members could explain their reasoning and, she said, persuade her to join them.

"I've always had great concerns about the involvement of Connected Communities," she said. "They represent themselves as representing the community, and I'm not sure they do."

The board then went into executive session, saying it did not want to risk maligning the organization in public. When it emerged it voted again, this time with Powell joining the other dissenters to defeat the measure.

Funchess and Sheppard said their main objection was that School 33 may soon enter into state receivership, a status they said could affect other plans.

"It would be premature at this point to make a decision on moving forward with something when we don't know what we're dealing with," Funchess said.

Elliott's main concern was that the project would be a driver of gentrification.

"They're putting a black face on it to make it like it's for our community and I don't believe it is," she said. "Research shows that when white people come back into the community, taxes goes up and black people can't afford to stay. ... That's not going to happen on my watch."

Powell agreed that "the whole project is in fact about gentrification." She also said she was concerned Connected Communities is trying to commandeer the school rather than work as a partner.

"They wanted a certain kind of control," Powell said. "They weren't looking to be just good-faith partners."

The board members raised those issues in interviews this week, but there was no explanation of the "no" vote in public session at the board meeting. Leslie- Smith of Connected Communities and other supporters said they were caught off-guard by the opposition.

"That's what's most concerning, is that I'm not exactly sure what the opposition was about," she said. "If there was a major concern it seems like it should have been brought to our attention, because it's quite possible they don't fully understand the work."

The organization is supported by most of the significant charitable foundations in Rochester. It uses a model called purpose-built communities that exists in Atlanta, among other places. Several people from Rochester, including school board President Van White, traveled to Atlanta to see the model in action.

"It was one of the few times I had seen a community gather together on a variety of issues and work collaboratively," White said. "It's not just education but housing, jobs, education, poverty in general. And it's working."

Henry Fitts, director of Mayor Lovely Warren's Office of Innovation and Strategic Initiatives, represents the city of Rochester on the Connected Communities board. He said the board's decision doesn't kill the project altogether.

"We have a plan A, B and C regarding all the different aspects of the Connected Communities work," he said. "They're going to keep moving forward with an alternative strategy and we'll be supportive wherever they go."

Confusion on neighborhood schools

The episode illustrates the confused nature of the district's policy toward neighborhood and community schools. The board and administration have expressed strong interest in having more children attend a school near their home but have struggled to put that into policy.

The Path Forward initiative was supposed to result in a new commitment and policy but the board has not taken definitive action. In the meantime a piecemeal approach has emerged, with School 33 and Enrico Fermi School 17 getting special consideration.

The Connected Communities resolution would have strengthened a feeder pattern from School 33 to East High School, making it the only formal feeder pattern in the district. East Superintendent Shaun Nelms is on the Connected Communities board of directors and said he, too, was unclear where the opposition had come from.

Sandra Anderson lives on Parsells Avenue, but her two grandchildren take buses to other schools outside the neighborhood because, she was told, there was no space for them at School 33. She had supported Connected Communities because it would reset priorities for neighborhood children.

"School 33 is my neighborhood — I wouldn't want my kids to take someone else's place, but it's my neighborhood," Anderson said. "My main interest is, I could get to them quickly. My second interest is that if there's any programs, PTA meetings, open houses going on, I can walk there."

Sheppard and Powell both said they'd be willing to entertain the measure again after the state announces the receivership list later this year; Funchess will leave the board at the end of December.

In the meantime, Leslie-Smith said Connected Communities will work with the school board to assuage its concerns but also explore, reluctantly, a partnership with charter schools.

“We were invested in working with RCSD, not just because it's something residents in the neighborhood have been very vocal about having in their neighborhood, but because of the size of the institution and the physical building itself being attached to a recreation center and library,” she said. “This forces Connected Communities to look at the charter model for our education strategy, and that is definitely not what we want.”

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In this 2007 photo, students enter School 33 for classes. JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO