

Connected Communities plan OK'd

Rochester school board reverses course on program that aims to boost district

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The Rochester school board has reversed course and agreed to join a partnership, Connected Communities, aimed at revitalizing part of northeast Rochester.

That organization has been marshaling support for a variety of anti-poverty development initiatives in the EMMA Beechwood neighborhood; it already has helped open Warfield Square, a 72-unit affordable housing project on East Main Street.

Its plan to develop John James Audubon School 33 as a community school, where existing resources are more tightly coordinated, was shot down at the school board in October after several board members raised concerns about gentrification and ceding control to outside organizations. That included the board rejecting a \$637,000 grant to fund an administrative position at the school for several years. Connected Communities Executive Director LaShunda Leslie-Smith said she was blindsided by the rejection, which had been endorsed by both the district and the East High School leadership as it related to a feeder pattern to the high school from School 33. She went back to speak with the dissenting board members and managed to persuade three of them — Natalie Sheppard, Melanie Funchess and Willa Powell — to change their minds and approve the resolution in December.

“We came to understand some of the pushback was that people misunderstood what ‘community schools’ actually are,” Leslie-Smith said. “Community schools became synonymous with receivership in people’s minds, and people thought it was a takeover.”

Sheppard said she was persuaded to support the resolution after Leslie-Smith said the \$637,000, which comes from the William and Sheila Konar Foundation, was not contingent on any particular terms in a memorandum of understanding regarding power-sharing at the school. Indeed, the December resolution has no formal terms attached to it beyond a shared commitment to a community school model.

The only remaining no-vote came from Cynthia Elliott,

who earlier had called the project a Trojan horse for gentrification (Beatriz LeBron was absent). That is also the opinion of the Atlantic/Culver/East Main Neighborhood Association, which opposes Connected Communities and the national model behind it, called purpose-built communities.

Its president, Sunshine Jacobs, said EMMA is “wildly different” from neighboring Beechwood and doesn’t want to be associated with either the community school project or the planned East High pipeline.

“It’s not clear to us how this benefits anybody,” she said. “What you’re talking about is privatization of a public school and the insistence that the (local) children attend there. And it’s a move toward gentrification, which is what this really is all about.”

Leslie-Smith replied, diplomatically: “There are multiple communities within the community. There’s no one entity that represents the whole.”

The idea of a community school is to ensure that the services available at a given school building are comprehensive and well coordinated, both for students and the surrounding community. For School 33, the largest elementary school in Monroe County, that includes a rec center, city library branch and health clinic, among other things.

The grant pays the salary of a person in charge of that coordination. Enrico Fermi School 17 in the JOSANA neighborhood is the model, Leslie-Smith said.

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Leslie-Smith

