

For-profit charter school proposed

School

Operator also ran botched Leadership Academy

JUSTIN MURPHY @CITIZENMURPHY

A for-profit charter school operator with an ignominious history in Rochester is seeking to open a school thanks to a loophole in the state law banning new for-profit charter schools.

Maple Street Charter School submitted a letter of intent to the SUNY Charter Schools Institute in December. It listed as its operator National Heritage Academies (NHA), the for-profit company that ran Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School from 2000 until 2005, when it was closed by the state for poor performance.

On its website, Maple Street says it hopes to open as an elementary school in 2017 and “will be founded on academic excellence, character development,

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student responsibility, and parental partnership.”

“NHA welcomes the opportunity to return to Rochester after a 10-year absence in order to make right on its commitment to provide high-quality education to the families in this community,” spokeswoman Jennifer Hoff wrote in an email.

NHA is a Michigan company that runs 81 for-profit charter schools in nine states, including several in New York that were grandfathered in before for-profit charters were banned in 2010.

State law on the topic is clear: “For-profit business or corporate entities shall not be eligible to submit an application to establish a charter school ... or operate or manage a charter school.”

The SUNY Charter School Institute, however, announced late last year that it has one charter left to issue from 2007, before the for-profit ban was enacted.

“The remaining 2007 charter allows greater flexibility in terms of facilities and school management and operations,” a notice on its website reads. “For example ... this charter allows for contracting with a for-profit entity to manage the delivery of educational services.”

It invited proposals for schools outside New York City. It appears that Maple Street is the only eligible for-profit on the list of letters of intent that the state received in December.

Its full application was submitted by last week’s deadline and should be made public soon. If approved, the K-8 school would be at 1020 Maple St. in the former Mapledale Party House. That was also the site of Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School during its brief tenure.

Rochester Leadership Academy Charter School is not to be confused with the Leadership Academy for Young Men, a high school in the Rochester City School District on the Charlotte High School campus. That first charter school raised eyebrows even before it opened when its lead applicant, Roberts Wesleyan College professor John Walker, suggested students would be taught creationism in science class. He later retreated and said teachers might only hint there are other theories besides evolution and suggest students ask their parents about them. The school was ordered to close by the state in 2005 due to a lack of academic progress by its students. The state closed another for-profit in Rochester, the Charter School of Science and Technology, at the same time. Four years later, Rochester Leadership Academy's former board of directors sued National Heritage Academies, claiming it hadn't supported the school as it promised it would. The two sides came to a confidential settlement in 2010.

Carrie Remis, who served on Gov. Andrew Cuomo's recent education task force, supports charter schools but has raised concerns about the sector's willingness to police itself, and the state's ability to properly vet proposals. She said SUNY's response to the Maple Street proposal will show whether it is serious about maintaining strict standards for charter schools.

"As the Greater Works scandal before it also shows, Rochester's charter boosters need to step up and do their due diligence before endorsing prospective charter schools," she wrote in an email. "No more sniff tests and beauty contests. ... Charter supporters need to be accountable to Rochester's students and insist on charter school quality and good governance from day one."

Hoff, the NHA spokeswoman, said the company examined why Rochester Leadership Academy failed and applied the lessons at its other schools. Part of the change at Maple Street, she said, is a different school leadership structure, with several grade-level deans and other leaders replacing a single principal.

In December 2014, the state granted a charter to 22-year-old Ted Morris Jr. for Greater Works Charter School, but rescinded it after it came to light that Morris had fabricated most of his résumé.

The Maple Street building now serves as one of Rochester Prep's campuses. But Anna Hall, the chief operating officer of Rochester Prep's parent organization, Uncommon Schools, said it would soon announce a new location.

"We have been aware of NHA's desire for a new charter for some time and so are planning to move out of the (Maple Street) location sometime this summer," she wrote in an email.

Maple Street has an advocate in the Greater Rochester Chamber of Commerce, which submitted a letter of support to the state earlier this week. Chamber President and former state Lieutenant Governor Robert Duffy said he met with NHA representatives in Albany two weeks ago and believes they deserve a second chance.

"They admitted the last operation was not successful," he said. "They really felt bad and want to come back and make it a success." Duffy said he believes charter schools, like traditional public schools, should have an opportunity to turn things around. He also said NHA has a new leadership team in place and a new plan for success, but acknowledged he doesn't know the details. "I'm not an educator so they didn't lay out their whole educational plan," he said. "There's no other reason to believe (in them) other than they have a good reputation (and are) run by a family that has a pretty good business reputation nationally. ... I don't look at who the operators are; the most important thing is that parents who want a choice should have a choice." Kyle Rosenkrans, the CEO of the regional Northeast Charter Schools Network, agreed with Duffy, writing in an email: "With (a majority) of Rochester residents wanting more charter schools and the district in a holding pattern on any serious reform, it's clear that people just want more great schools. It doesn't matter who runs

them. That's a topic that only the political elites fight over.”

A 2010 audit by the state comptroller found NHA overcharged another of its schools, Brooklyn Excelsior Charter School, by more than \$800,000 a year in rent, and also refused to disclose \$1.7 million worth of its spending, calling it “private and proprietary.”

The Maple Street building is owned by an NHA holding company; Rochester Prep pays \$138,000 a year in rent.

NHA is controlled by J.C. Huizenga, the cousin of billionaire Wayne Huizenga and a prominent businessman and education reform advocate in his own right. He has spent \$230,000 on political donations in New York since 2000, including \$29,000 to a Cuomo reelection committee.

The State University of New York board of trustees is scheduled to vote on which applications to accept by April.

It also received one other letter of intent for a Rochester charter school in December: Boys to Men Community Charter School. According to a parallel application with the New York State Board of Regents, Boys to Men would be an all-male school serving grades 6- 12 . The school previously applied under the name JABEA. Its board president would be Darryl Porter, a former top official with the city of Rochester.

JMURPHY7@Gannett

.com



The former Mapledale Party House at 1020 Maple St. would be the site of the proposed Maple Street Charter School.

FILE PHOTO 2005