

## CHARTERS ON THE MOVE

### Charters

#### Lack of buildings sends Rochester schools to Greece

**JUSTIN MURPHY @CITIZENMURPHY**

As charter schools in Rochester enroll ever more students, a lack of suitable facilities in the city is increasingly leading them to Greece — and has Mayor Lovely Warren reconsidering a tax policy partly responsible for sending them outside city limits.

About 4,600 Rochester students are in charter programs this school year, up sevenfold over 10 years. An increasing number of suburban students are now in charter schools as well.

Not only are there more charter operators, but those that have been approved over the last several years are still adding grades each year. For instance, PUC Achieve Charter School opened in 2014 with only fifth-graders, but will eventually serve grades 5-8. There is little reason to believe the growth will slow in the near future.

The upward trend in enrollment means a steady demand for new building space. That need is exacerbated by a lack of state facilities funding for charter schools, meaning they must pay the mortgage or lease from their operating budget. A lawsuit addressing that funding disparity is currently winding its way through the courts.

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**“It has been vacant for a little while, but it’s good that it’s going to be reused and won’t be left to deteriorate.”**

**GINA DIBELLA**

**CHAIRWOMAN OF GREECE’S HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMITTEE, ON THE FORMER OUR MOTHER OF SORROWS CHURCH SITE SOUGHT BY THE ROCHESTER ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOL**



**Students at the Rochester Academy Charter School play reaction ball in a makeshift gym in the basement of the school's Portland Avenue campus in Rochester. The charter school is one of several schools looking to move to Greece because of a lack of building space in the city.**

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The most attractive spaces in the city tend to be in former Catholic schools or churches, but those facilities are often ill-suited for 21st-century education needs. Some lack gymnasiums or cafeterias, and secondary school students can find themselves cramped in space meant for younger children. With the suitable buildings in Rochester mostly accounted for, schools have been looking instead to neighboring Greece. Discovery Charter School moved from Irondequoit to the former Greece Odyssey Academy building on Hoover Drive in 2013. Renaissance Academy Charter School of the Arts opened the following year in the former Kirk Road Elementary School.

Young Women's College Prep announced earlier this year it would move to Greece, sharing space with Discovery Charter School. And Rochester Academy Charter School, a high school currently on Portland Avenue, is working out a lease for the former Our Mother of Sorrows Church in Greece's Paddy Hill neighborhood. That is four of the area's 12 charter providers with at least one school in Greece, even though the vast majority of their students come from Rochester. "People don't want to go to Greece, but it's tough," said Joe Klein, PUC Achieve's board president and co-founder of the charter recruitment organization E3 Rochester. "As the charter schools grow, there's only so much available real estate." Rochester Academy Charter School's move to Mother of Sorrows is of particular note, as the church, completed in 1878, is one of the oldest in Greece and a monument to the Irish community that once thrived there. After the parish moved to a new church building in 1966, the old Mother of Sorrows building housed the town's Paddy Hill library, then a continuing education program. It has sat empty for about eight years. "This building is an excellent example of reuse over the years," said Gina DiBella, chairwoman of the town's Historic Preservation Committee. "It has been vacant for a little while, but it's good that it's going to be reused and won't be left to

deteriorate.”

Mayor Warren has been clear in her support for charter schools but found herself at odds with some charter leaders last year regarding facilities.

When the Rochester City School District closes a school, the ownership of the building automatically reverts to the city. That happened in June 2015, when Schools 22 and 36 in northeast Rochester were shuttered.

A request for prospective purchasers made clear the city preferred to have the buildings put back on the tax rolls, not sold to a nonprofit. And city law states that even if the city sells a parcel that had been tax-exempt to an entity that qualifies for a tax exemption — for instance, selling a former city school to a charter school operator — that new purchaser must pay property taxes for five years anyway. As it turned out, no viable tax-paying purchaser stepped forward for either building. The city then sold each school for \$1.5 million to charter school operators (Eugenio Maria de Hostos bought School 22 and Rochester Prep bought School 36) and, through negotiations, waived the five-year tax requirement.

“We’ve had a lot of charter schools inquire about space, and ... it’s easier if it’s already a school,” Warren said. “You have two well-respected charter organizations that wanted to purchase city school buildings. This is my way of showing support for those schools and for choices for parents.”

She had asked City Council to pass legislation that would eliminate the five-year tax requirement for all schools or churches in similar circumstances, but the legislators declined. Instead, the city will continue to consider each case separately.

The City School District, which already faces mounting financial losses as its students leave for charter schools, is even further disadvantaged when those schools move to Greece. The district is responsible for busing charter students, so more distant schools mean higher transportation costs. In other parts of the country, including New York City, it is common for charters to lease space in public school buildings, a practice known as co-location. Former Rochester Superintendent Bolgen Vargas said he would be open to the idea as a revenue source, but the school board has been more resistant.

“I don’t even accept scenarios like that,” school board President Van White said last year. “I believe we’ll have such demand for facilities that we won’t have extra space.” In an interview Wednesday, Warren expressed impatience with that line of thinking and said she has pressed the district to consider sharing space with charters.

“I’ve spoken to the superintendent and school board members (and told them): ‘You just don’t have the (enrollment) numbers anymore,’ ” she said. “Their disdain for charter schools clouds their judgment in terms of maximizing the use of buildings.” Facility use plans in the City School District have a tendency to change, so it is not obvious to predict which buildings might either come up for sale or be candidates for co-location in the next several years. One possibility for co-location could be the cavernous Charlotte campus, where Charlotte High School is closing and the Leadership Academy for Young Men is expanding.

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**Students at the Rochester Academy Charter School listen to teacher Rich Vleck in a makeshift gym in the basement of the school's Portland Avenue campus.**

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**Teacher Stephanie Timm shares a classroom with other teachers at Rochester Academy Charter School's Portland Avenue campus. The high school is working out a lease at the former Mother of Sorrows Church in Greece.**

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**ROCHESTER MAYOR LOVELY WARREN**