

300 parents attend session on proposed charter school

By Priscilla Greear

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At an information exchange hosted by the Somerset Gables Parents Association, over 300 parents eagerly questioned representatives of Somerset Academy, Inc. about its efforts to open a charter school this fall in Coral Gables at University Baptist Church.

Crowded into the Biltmore Hotel's Alhambra Ballroom for the Saturday, May 22, meeting, they quizzed Somerset representatives about everything from the quality of the proposed physical education in the church courtyard to the nature of their dual foreign-language program with Spanish and possibly Mandarin. But the overriding question permeated the session: Will the school really open at the church, and this August no less?

The Academica charter school management company, contracted to open Somerset Academy of Coral Gables, awaits the city decision on its application for a certificate of occupancy. Academica president Fernando Zulueta contends that Florida law allows for charter schools to open in religious institutions under religious institution zoning and that they therefore do not need to apply for a change in zoning and land use.

However, City Attorney Elizabeth Hernandez has opined that Somerset will have to apply for conditional use request for a change in zoning and land use, citing how the church's existing preschool is capped by the city at 110 students and 18 staff members.

The church “has religious/institutional land use designation. That zoning is good enough for a charter school,” asserted Mr. Zulueta, adding that they are asking for a separate approval from that given for the preschool. “Hopefully, they will respond back in the next couple of days on the certificate of use request. We are waiting for that and discussing how can we deal with the legal question...Hopefully we can come to a mutual agreement so that the school can open or we can go together and ask a judge.”

Somerset Academy, Inc., a network of 18 South Florida charter schools started in 1997, and Academica have applied to open the school with over 600 students in grades pre-K through 8; they would lease property at the church, located at 624 Anastasia Ave.

The parents association formed in April to support efforts to open the school. Association chair Paul Zamek announced that the second round of pre-applications will be accepted until the end of May through the Somerset website, www.somersetacademyschools.com.

“Right now we have about 1,000 people who have sent in letters of interest and filled out forms. Should the city open it that could be turned into an application,” he said. “The reason we were created was to help Somerset Academy to reach out to the public.”

Likewise, the reason the Biltmore Neighborhood Association was formed by church neighbors is to oppose a school of such magnitude, which they believe will pollute the quiet neighborhood. Treasurer Andrea Moscetti said that his association has nearly 500 signatures for its protest petition and that most people in the neighborhood oppose it.

And if petitioners are indeed required to apply for conditional use, Mr. Moscetti doubts Somerset’s ability to complete quickly that application process. It would involve a public monthly Planning Department meeting before the July deadline when the Miami-Dade County School Board’s charter school approval granted in July 2009 expires if specified conditions aren’t secured, he said. “I don’t see how they’d be able to have it without going through a very long process,” said Mr. Moscetti.

Mr. Zulueta said that Academica approached UBC in late 2009 after getting School Board approval and then began due diligence research, including a traffic study before determining the feasibility of the project. For that reason it didn't apply to the city Development Review Committee for an initial review until the spring or inform neighbors of plans before they learned of them through rumors in March.

At the Biltmore meeting, project architect Rolando Llanes reported to participants that he is currently meeting with the Coral Gables Department of Public Works to respond to comments made during the May 7 initial Development Review Committee meeting on topics such as traffic flow, building safety and occupancy. "All schools have an impact on the neighborhood, planning and traffic," he said, adding that "I'd say 90 percent of all schools are in residential neighborhoods."

The architectural firm Civica is currently studying the possibility of increasing the amount of car stacking on site to over 30 vehicles at a time going through the church grounds loop off of Cardena Street to minimize to overflow of traffic on the streets. "I don't see a sticking point of concern (but) timing is critical," said Mr. Llanes, adding that no deadlines have been set to resolve Development Review Committee issues.

If the city grants permission for the school to open, Mr. Zulueta acknowledged in an interview that it would have a right to impose limitations on the school based on project analysis. "They have a right to make reasonable restrictions based on evidence," he said.

Despite all the uncertainties, Somerset principals Shannine Sadesky-Hunt and Idalia Suarez and Somerset Academy, Inc. board chair Andreina Figueroa introduced to participants highlights of the nonprofit's curriculum and philosophy.

Somerset schools, as tuition-free public schools, follow state academic standards and require certified teachers but have more flexibility to incorporate innovative, creative practices and individualized learning plans. And while the church lacks an athletic field and the school would not use the War Memorial Youth Center, it would use its courtyard and indoor space to meet state physical education requirements. "We have the fourth-highest performing school district in the state of Florida so you know your child is definitely going to be getting an excellent education," said Ms. Sadesky-Hunt.

The school would give priority for admission to those within a two-mile radius of the school, said Mr. Zamek. “It’s become very clear that there is enough enrollment base in the city to populate the school. We like to be a neighborhood school. It does not mean if you don’t live in the two-mile radius you won’t get in.”

Board member and Gables resident Jeff Griese hopes to have more options for his 3- and 5-year-old children. “It’s a great opportunity to put a really good school in a neighborhood we can send kids to. They have a huge track record. We’ve seen through Somerset...how well the kids do,” he said. “It’s so hard to get our kids into any school close by—it’s frustrating.”

But while supporters cite overcrowding at both Sunset Elementary and Coral Gables Elementary, Mr. Moscetti noted that G.W. Carver Elementary School and Henry S. West Laboratory Schools are under capacity. “If you want a special neighborhood then perhaps public school is not for you. All public schools in Coral Gables are performing very well.”

Many from outside the two-mile radius like Carolina Avila left the meeting less hopeful. “I like the parental involvement,” said the Coconut Grove resident. “It’s a dream come true and hopefully it will. If not we will have to wait another year and see what happens.”