

Chalking it up: What it takes to build a charter school

By ELISHA PAPPACODA, DAILY SUN

THE VILLAGES - The Villages' three charter schools have proven they have what it takes. But what does it take to build a successful charter school?

Taking a cue from the success of The Villages charters, and fearing a burst of growth coupled with a lack of classrooms seen in the southern end of the county, Lady Lake is setting the stage for the possibility of creating its own charter school down the road.

A charter school is a public school that has been granted a charter, or contract, from the state. It is generally exempt from certain school regulations, but must meet accountability standards to keep its charter, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

The Villages elementary, middle and high schools were granted charter status under the auspices of the Sumter County School Board, and the elementary school opened its doors in 2000. The Villages donated the land and constructed the building, which reportedly cost \$6.8 million. The school had an operating budget of \$1.4 million its first year.

Over the past three years, The Villages Charter Elementary School, which enrolls 758 students, and the middle school, with 408 students, earned consistent "A" grades from the Florida Department of Education. However the high school, with 298 students and its first class on the way to graduation next year, dropped from an "A" to a "B".

Known as charters-in-the-workplace, The Villages schools were created to fulfill a specific need - educating the children of Villages employees and subcontractors.

Sumter County Schools Superintendent Rick Shirley oversees the education of 7,300 students, including the more than 1,450 children who attend The Villages schools.

Earlier in the year, Shirley said one major prerequisite in starting up a charter school is identifying its mission.

"I think you have to understand the 'why?' before you go anywhere else with it," Shirley said earlier this year. "I would assume that there's got to be a benefit. You do things to increase the efficiency of the organization or you do things to improve the service level to kids."

The town of Lady Lake may one day have to answer the question of "why" if they pursue one possible angle in their quest to enhance educational facilities in the area. Lady Lake recently authorized education impact fees to the tune of \$3,000 to be levied per new residential unit on future developments only. The money would be set aside for use expressly at the town's discretion to either aid Lake County

in building a school in the general vicinity or for use to create a municipal charter school.

Like public schools, funding for charters is given by the state to the county, which then funnels the money to its various schools. But charter schools are not a cheap endeavor.

“Somebody usually has to absorb a great deal of cost, especially at the secondary level. Secondary schools are the most expensive to operate,” Shirley said. “That becomes critical. Somebody needs to really sit down and look at the cost.”

Lake County School District board members have previously expressed a desire for Lady Lake to go to a secondary school, if they were to create a charter, rather than duplicate the district's top performing elementary school in town.

Shirley suggests anyone considering starting a charter school do their “due diligence” and “carefully count the costs and needs.” He also notes the importance of reviewing how other nearby districts have formed their own charter schools.

The successful City of Coral Springs Charter School, a combination middle/high school, was established to help ease overcrowding in area public schools, according to Ellen Liston, assistant city manager for Coral Springs.

Serving 1,600 students in grades six through 12, the school has a proven track record. It improved its Department of Education rating from a “B” in 2002-2003 to an “A” for the last two school years.

“Funding is the key obstacle, and then facilities,” Liston said. “We were able to take an ill-used mall, which was going out of business, and turn it into a school.”

Broward County took the other half of the site and transformed it into a regional library.

“They co-exist very nicely,” Liston said.

Her advice to a another Florida municipality considering establishing a charter school is to do their research and study hard.

“Make sure that you have a long-term plan for success before you ever open for the short term. That means figuring out your financial issues and facility issues,” she said, noting that building a successful city-run charter is “very possible.”

Lady Lake searches for a school site

If the town eventually decides to build a charter school, it will take intense study to develop everything

from the declaration of a start-up charter school's mission to the completion of an up-and-running school.

Having established a \$3,000 per structure education impact fee, the town also voted in favor of an ordinance that would allow it to keep the fees for a possible charter school.

With start-up cash soon to be in-hand, the town's next big problem will be location.

Lady Lake's School Facilities Steering Committee is charged with locating an ideal site where either the county or the town may construct a school.

According to the county's criteria, 30 to 40 acres are required for a middle school and 50 to 60 are needed for a high school. Lake County requires four acres for the first 200 elementary school students, plus one acre for each additional 100 students, totaling 15 to 20 acres; six acres for the first 300 middle school students plus one acre for each additional 100 students, totaling 30 to 40 acres; and seven acres for the first 300 high school students plus one acre for each additional 100 students, totaling 50 to 60 acres.

Schools sites must also provide adequate access for separate car and bus service, and elementary schools may only border areas with low-volume traffic. In addition, environmental noise may not go higher than 105 decibels, the school cannot be built next-door to industrial buildings, and the school must be built on suitable soil. Lady Lake Realtor Tony Powell has been helping the town in scouting possible plots of land that meet Lake County school site requirements.

Lady Lake School Facilities Steering Committee member Ralph Piccola said he's not worried that the committee will have trouble finding an ideal location.

“There should be plenty of places,” Piccola said. “It's a matter of making time for the people to open up the site for us to observe.”

Charter Schools USA, which manages more than two dozen charter schools in Florida, is a for-profit company hired by school founders to manage all aspects of the education business from constructing the schoolhouse to developing a tailored curriculum and hiring staff.

According to Charter Schools USA founder Jonathan Hage, if the land is being provided for free, construction of a new school usually costs about \$115 per square foot.

A structure with the capacity to educate 1,000 to 1,600 students can cost the city anywhere from \$10 million to \$15 million, according to Hage.

“Traditionally, you have to be prepared to have a reasonably strong capital infrastructure to go into the business,” said Hage, who formed his Fort Lauderdale-based company in 1997 after having been hired

by Gov. Jeb Bush to head the Foundation for Florida's Future.

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