

Building scarcity fuels instability

Two Rochester charter schools were in the news last week with two very different real estate problems.

Rochester Prep High School, the secondary program of the city's most successful charter school, has canceled classes this week to prepare a hasty move from leased space at 690 St. Paul St. after students led a boycott over longstanding environmental concerns. It will reopen at the former Nazareth Academy building on Lake Avenue in January.

Separately, a *Democrat and Chronicle* watchdog investigation that ran over the weekend found that Rochester Academy Charter School helped a related real estate company based in Syracuse turn a tidy profit on the lease and sale of the school's renovated property on Latta Road in Greece.

In different ways, the two situations illustrate a major headache for nearly every charter school in the city — there are simply not enough high-quality buildings to accommodate their growing enrollment.

There are a few reasons for the shortage, the most glaring being a lack of dedicated facilities funding for charter schools.

While the Rochester City School District is using more than \$1 billion to fix up its old schools, charter schools need to either raise private funds or dip into the money intended for classroom purposes.

That distinction is the subject of a lawsuit from charter school families that's been pending in state court for several years. If those families prevail, it would trigger either a massive state funding increase for charter schools or, alternately, a wave of co-habitation laws such as currently exist in New York City. Raising private money is also a challenge. Charter schools are only authorized for five years to begin with, so banks can be hesitant to make a longterm loan to a new operation. And since the schools generally start with only one or two grade levels then grow out each year, their facilities needs change over time.

That leads to a carousel of building moves every fall, as schools swap spaces depending on their short-term needs. Students at nearly every local charter school have been interrupted by either a building move or a massive construction project.

Finding suitable sites is a constant challenge

In the meantime, the choices for growing charter schools are limited, and the current set of options only exists because of declines in public and parochial school enrollment that have forced building closures.

Nearly every charter school in the area is in a closed Catholic or public school — some freshly renovated, but many in more or less their original condition.

The 690 St. Paul St. building, on a brownfield at the site of a former Bausch + Lomb factory, was never an ideal location for Rochester Prep or any of the other Rochester students who have been forced there over the last decade or so. The school is now moving to a building owned by Education Success Network, a deep-pocketed umbrella group that runs two charter schools of its own, and has flouted ethical benchmarks with a series of related-party transactions.

Rochester Academy Charter School had the same related-party problem with its building on Latta Road. The only reason it re-located from the city to Greece in the first place, though, is because there weren't any suitable buildings in Rochester. The same is true for Renaissance Academy Charter School for the Arts and Discovery Charter School, both in former Greece public school buildings.

Northeast Charter Schools Network, a regional advocacy group, put out a report last month detailing some of these concerns. It concluded: "In Buffalo and Rochester, the denial of state facilities funds leaves charter school

children in those cities with much less educational funding. ... This means some schools with great vision will simply never open their doors because securing the capital and funding for a building is an insurmountable challenge.”

Those very real financial challenges don't excuse self-dealing with public money, and they're certainly not a good reason to keep children in a building where their health is at risk (though there's no indication that's presently the case at 690 St. Paul St.).

As charter schools enroll a growing number of Rochester-area children, though, the structural disadvantages they face in obtaining quality school buildings are becoming an ever more prominent public concern.

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Students from Rochester Academy Charter School use the former Our Mother of Sorrows Church as a gym in Greece. MAX

Students from Rochester Academy Charter School use the former Our Mother of Sorrows Church as a gym in Greece. MAX SCHULTE/@MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Shyhiem Rodriguez and Regina Harper lead fellow Rochester Prep High School students in chants outside the Rochester City School District office on Broad Street. They say the district knowingly rented a building with toxins to their charter school. TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/@TYEE23/STAFF



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