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Deer Lake an elementary school again? TrekNorth eyes building for K-5 expansion

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4-5 minutes

BEMIDJI -- A Bemidji-area charter school's expansion plans could take it to a castoff elementary school.

TrekNorth Junior and Senior High School leaders hope to expand into elementary grades, and are eyeing the former Deer Lake Elementary School building as a potential spot for those students.

Staff at the charter school hoped to build a K-5 building next to their existing grades 6-12 school off Paul Bunyan Drive, but had to put those plans on hold after learning Naylor Property Management, which owns the land and building and leases them to Trek, was reluctant to sell it this year. That put the charter school's board to a simple-but-tough decision: wait to expand or expand somewhere else.

The board voted in February to look for other spots to put the elementary expansion, and staff had the Deer Lake site inspected and hired a representative to negotiate a sale price.

“TrekNorth is working within a very tight set of financial parameters, so although Deer Lake is not as close to town as we’d like, the fact that there is an existing school that could be renovated for our purposes is very exciting,” Director Dan McKeon wrote to TrekNorth families in an April 25 letter. The old elementary school is about 2,000 square feet larger than the one Trek staff planned to build. “And the 25 acres of forest provides many opportunities for hands on learning in a natural environment.”

The existing secondary school building and its students will stay put, McKeon said, but the Deer Lake school would be a permanent home for the charter’s elementary students.

“We like the idea of having a place where younger kids have their own campus,” McKeon explained.

TrekNorth has about 240 students in grades 6-12, and hopes to add roughly the same amount in the planned K-5 expansion.

Buying and renovating Deer Lake could be considerably cheaper than building a new school next to the existing one on Paul Bunyan Drive, too. TrekNorth staff projected that the original expansion plan would cost about \$4.5 million, but preliminary estimates put the cost of renovating Deer Lake between \$2.1 million to \$2.7 million, and the building and grounds were sold less than a year ago for \$500,000.

Charter schools can’t levy taxes or own land like traditional school districts, so TrekNorth leaders planned to pay for the original expansion by selling municipal bonds and then own the land and building through an affiliated nonprofit.

Bemidji Area Schools built Deer Lake Elementary in the early 1980s and closed it in 2001 as the school district grappled with declining enrollment and budget cuts. District staff used the mothballed elementary as a warehouse and source of spare parts until this past September, when they sold the building and land to 3Suns Research, a two-person research and development startup that hoped to build an engineering school there.

But the company had to shelve those plans only weeks afterward, when the U.S. Department of Education stopped recognizing the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools.

“With ACICS suspended, there’s no way for us to pursue accreditation, and so that means we’re dead in the water at least until fall 2019,” said David Bahr, 3Suns’ Research Director and owner. The company has other tech projects in the works, but isn’t using most of the cavernous building. “In the meantime, we’ve gotta downsize.”

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