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School for academically challenged finds new site

50-acre Brandywine Hundred tract to be bought from Woodlawn Trustees for new 'green' facility

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ABHA Architects
An artist's rendering shows the proposed new energy-efficient Pilot School to be built on a 50-acre tract behind the Homewood Suites hotel.

The Pilot School in Talleyville has searched for at least four years for a place to move, meanwhile raising all but \$500,000 of the \$10.5 million it needs to break ground at a suitable site.

Recently, the private school for academically challenged students found some ground to break -- and it is on a parcel with a familiar owner only a half mile away.

The school has an option to buy a 50-acre property just up the road, off Concord Pike behind the Homewood Suites hotel. The current owner is the Woodlawn Trustees, which also sold the 16-acre property on Garden of Eden Road to the Pilot School where it built the current school 44 years ago.

Vernon Green, vice president of the Woodlawn Trustees, a not-for-profit organization that seeks a balance between reasonable development and the preservation of open spaces, said the school should be less intrusive than other types of development.

"We thought it was a perfect use for the land," he said. "It's near the main traffic arteries but sits back enough that it gives it some seclusion."

School Director Kathy Craven, who expects to purchase the \$4.5 million property by the end of the year, agrees. The private school, which has been seeking a more energy-efficient building and a little more room for improved facilities, would take up only a small portion of the property, leaving the remainder as open space, including woods and a former horse farm.

"On the 50 acres that we are moving to and purchasing, 17 acres -- which is one acre more than we have right now -- is able to be built on, so we can have athletic fields," she said. "The rest of the acreage will remain as it is now for open space for the public, for hiking trails and biking trails or riding trails. There are several farms around there that have horses for riding."

The architectural firm of ABHA (formerly Anderson Brown Higley Associates) submitted preliminary conceptual drawings and a floor plan for the new school, which would be 22,000 square feet larger than the current 55,000-square-foot building.

"We're trying to develop the character of the architecture to go with that natural site," said ABHA's Mike Deptula, the lead architect on the project.

It also will be a "green" building, with solar collectors on the roof and two classroom wings featuring vegetative roofs, which improve thermal efficiency, last longer and reduce stormwater runoff, he said. A geothermal heating and cooling system also is being considered.

"We are really impressed with their plans," Green said. "A lot of people talk green technology. But they're actually doing green technology."

As a lesson, children at the ungraded school for ages 5 to 14 will compile energy data collected at the old school with data from the new building after they get there, comparing the energy output, efficiency and cost, Craven said.

"It's really important for them to understand that natural resources are something to be taken care of," she said.

The entire school will participate in the building's design, Craven said.

"We want it to be energy-efficient, so we're studying and doing all kinds of energy models," she said. "The teachers are directly involved in the designing of the new school building. And the kids will be, too, as we get further along. It's a life skill for them. We wanted to get the kids more hands-on related to the world around them."

At the new building, students also will get more hands-on science classrooms with lab stations, which the current building does not have, Craven said. It will include bigger and better facilities for art, music and physical education, as well as dedicated space for occupational and physical therapy, which currently are conducted in a converted classroom.

And, Craven said, "We're going to have opportunities for year-round education for our current students and for students who don't need the Pilot program full time."

The farm on the property on Woodlawn Road off Concord Pike currently is occupied by a leaseholder, and a new farm in the area has been found for that tenant, Green said.

"We are preserving that," Craven said of the farm. "We are going to be using the barn for our animal-husbandry program. And the house is going to be used there for a state trooper and his family, for security."

Someone has made an offer to buy the current school property, but Craven said it is still too early in the process to talk about it publicly.

The move to the bigger property made better economic sense than staying put, she said. School officials had looked at rehabilitating the old school building versus constructing a new one, and they determined it would cost less than \$1 million more to build anew.

"We are hoping to break ground a year from now, and then it will take 18 months to build," Craven said.

The 160 children at the Pilot School are enrolled for an average of three to five years. "We have to be creative and figure out how to help them learn," Craven said. After attending the school, the students return to regular schools, and Pilot has a placement department that works to find the right fit for them.