County to decide on charter school

By Bob Cane
Staff Writer

The Kern County Board of Education is slated to decide, on Feb. 10, whether to up-hold or over-rule a local board's 3-2 December vote denying approval of a charter school petition some say will suck millions of dollars from local schools and not provide promised educational advantages.

According to a news release by sponsors of the Paramount-Bard Academy, and a column by the Delano Joint Union High School District published in *The Delano Record,* the board continued a Jan. 13 hearing after receiving essentially the same variety of testimony for and against approval of the proposed academy that the Delano Union School District Board of Trustees heard at two public hearings late last year.

If the county board upholds the DUSD decision, the academy will appeal to the State Department of Public Instruction, which, academy supporters have said, has a reputation of supporting charter school applications.

The meeting was held after *The Record's* deadline for last week.

In a release issued Thursday, Brent Malicote, principal of the proposed academy, said the board said it needed more time to "to make the best possible decision" and that Kern Schools staff asked Paramount to help it "draft an MOU (memorandum of understanding) which might alleviate concerns that the board may have regarding the charter school petition."

Malicote said the board also expressed interest in being a part of the appeals process for expulsions from the school. He said the academy has no objection to that.

"Additional checks and balances from locally elected boards can only add to the school overall effectiveness," he said, in the news release. "Adding an appeals process like this to the plan strengthens our proposal with even more local accountability."

He said lawyers for Paramount-Bard and County Schools expected to have an MOU negotiated by Jan. 20.

"PBA representatives are pleased with the opportunity to continue dialogue towards approval of this public charter school," he said, in the release.

The school is a cooperative effort of Paramount Farms and New York-based Bard College. It proposes to build to a 700-member student body, over a four-year period, and operate as a laboratory school for advanced educational methods, and a post-graduate training school for new teachers. Student tuition will be paid by the state, using the average daily attendance money that would otherwise go to the public school districts; and teachers-in-training would pay their own tuitions.

According to the news release, Delano Mayor Sam Ramirez and well-known local teacher Heidi Gonzalez Dyar were among the supporters at the county hearing. "Delano continues to grow, and is ready for this innovative charter school, " the mayor told the board. And Dyar testified that" families in Delano deserve to have a choice in where they send their children to school."

Ramirez, a substitute teacher, has said, in city council meetings,

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that he does not understand why the paramount-Bard application is meeting resistance. And Dyar is among those who stated, at the DUSD hearings, that local parents only have the choice of sending their children to public schools or expensive private religious school, some of which are out of town.

"The KCSOS Board asked all the right questions," Malicote said, in the news release. "I believe the board's intentions are only the best; they want to give this charter school the thoughtful consideration it deserves. We look forward to developing an MOU with the KCSOS staff that will alleviate concerns they may have. In the end, this school is all about the kids, and we believe our petition makes that quite clear."

According to the release, the academy "is committed to graduating students with a minimum of 30 hours of college credit, prepared to advance to college and complete post secondary degrees." It's primary goal is that 95 percent of its students will graduate, and 75 percent of those graduating will ultimately graduate from college. A high percentage of those graduates will return to the Delano area, Paramount-Bard has said.

Sponsors initially wanted to set up a separate academy within either the Delano Joint Union High School District, the elementary school district, or under some kind of joint agreement with both. However, the high school board of trustees turned them down for a number of reasons, including question about who would run the academy, how responsive its governing board would be to parents and the community, and the effect any financial loss to the district would have on its commitment to build a comprehensive high school in Earlimart.

Sponsors developed the charter school approach when it appeared there might also be opposition from some elementary school board members.

Rivera could not be reached as this was being written, Monday. However, the high school district's *Record* column said County Superintendent of Schools Larry Reider asked his staff to review the charter school petition to identify "any concerns that may result in statutory findings that the petition should be denied."

That review, the column said, showed problems in a number of areas, including transportation of students, teacher pay, financing of the promised equivalent of two years of college education, migrant education, special education, and the teaching of programs that would meet fine arts requirements for college entrance.

A county schools staff report said "students who do not live in the neighborhoods in the vicinity of the charter school will be less likely to attend if transportation is not provided. This is likely to result in an unrepresentative student body compared to those attending the comparison public school."

It also said that the academy proposes to pay teachers a competitive rate, but that rate would actually be lower than teachers of comparable training and experience receive from either of the local districts, or other districts in the area.

And regarding the college-equivalent course work, the report called its financing "the unanswerable question with the proviso that it would be unlawful for the charter school to require its students to pay tuition for this purpose."

"There is no evidence of an agreement with a college that reflects that college's commitment to provide two years of college education to every Paramount-Bard Academy student and waive the cost of that education, including the cost of textbooks." The report says.