Pickens applies to open charter school

BY GREG OLIVER
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PICKENS — Twenty community groups, including one in Pickens County, recently filed applications to open new public charter schools in South Carolina starting with the 2012-13 academic year.

The Youth Leadership Academy, if approved, would operate at the Concord Church Road site off S.C. 183 that formerly housed the National Guard Armory. The 19-acre complex already serves as the site for the Youth Learning Institute of Clemson University.

"We already have our headquarters on Concord Church Road and have enough classrooms on site, so we don't expect facilities to be a problem," said Patsy Smith, director of school-based programs for Youth Learning Institute of Clemson University and chair of the planning committee for the charter school. "We do exponential learning there through CSI (Clemson Student Investigators, which discovers the science of learning) and Camp Voyager (where technology meets outdoor adventure), and we have computers and a gymnasium already on site."



Brazell

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CHARTER: 'Hoping this will ... be replicated across the state'

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While 11 of the 20 charter school applicants will be sponsored by local school districts across the state, the Youth Leadership Academy is among nine that will be sponsored by the South Carolina Public Charter School District.

"We wanted to take a regional approach, so if you want to go with multi-districts, you have to go with the State Charter School District," she said. "We didn't want to restrict ourselves to Pickens County boundaries because we have partners whose influence stretches beyond Pickens County, and Oconee and Anderson counties are also in close proximity."

Wayne Brazell, superintendent of the South Carolina Public Charter School District, said he is excited about the possibility of a Pickens County addition.

"I think they (Youth Learning Institute) have a great track record with youth and the number of lives they touch around the state," Brazell said.

While some proposed charter schools never get off the ground, such as the ill-fated Southern Oaks that supporters sought for the Oakway area several years ago, Brazell said he is optimistic that won't be the case for this site.

"The huge thing about starting a charter school is the facility, whose site must be approved by the South Carolina Department for School Facilities," Brazell said.

"But they (Youth Learning Institute) have a great track record of working with youth across the state, and they have a facility in place that they can use. That's a huge advantage to them compared to most applicants."

During the next year, Brazell said the Youth Leadership Academy will be required to bring buildings on its site up to specifications required by the school facilities department, address staff and transportation and market the school.

The applications will be reviewed by the Charter School Advisory Committee to ensure compliance with the state's charter school law.

Once the advisory committee approves an application, the authorizing or sponsoring school district has 30 days to approve or deny it.

A decision is made a year in advance so schools that win approval can begin planning prior to their anticipated opening.

"Since they (Youth Leadership Academy) already have some notoriety and are already aligned with Clemson University in some aspects, I think they'll do just fine," Brazell said.

Smith said the Youth Leadership Academy will be divided into cohorts of 24 sixth-graders and 24 seventh-graders, with plans to add a grade of 24 students each year. The school is working with Pitsco — based out of Pittsburg, Kan., and recognized as one of the national leaders in curriculum supplies — especially when it comes to science.

"Right now, we're looking into curriculum possibilities, focusing on STEM (Science Technology Engineering Math) subjects as well as health and fitness," Smith said. "We also have responsibility for the ZestQuest program (which seeks to empower children and communities with the knowledge and tools to lead a healthy life) and that will be a part of the middle school."

While school administration will be decided at a later time, Smith said the purpose of the Pickens area charter school is to create an environment where the teacher serves as a facilitator rather than a purveyor of knowledge and to develop model classrooms.

Two teachers will be needed the first year. Smith said administration, including a principal, would be decided by the board at a later date.

"There will be more group work, more problem solving and students will take more responsibility for their learning," she said.

Although the Youth Learning Institute is part of the planning committee for the Youth Leadership Academy, Smith said whether the Institute continues to play a role on the board would be determined by an upcoming election.

"The whole basis of charter schools is that they are governed by a board," Smith said. "The stakeholders of the school elect a governing board, parents have a vote, teachers have a vote and they elect eight members to serve on the board."

Smith added that the primary purpose of the Pickens based academy is to "raise the bar in education in South Carolina."

"We're hoping this will be a model project that will be replicated across the state," she said.

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