



Sunday, July 06, 2008

Antrim group hopes to open school in fall

David P. Greisman
Sentinel Staff

ANTRIM - With time running out before students would need to move in, officials at a college preparatory boarding school in Antrim say the first day of classes may need to be pushed back if the campus is not ready.

For the moment, the Maharishi Academy of Total Knowledge, situated on the former Hawthorne College site, is still scheduled to open to students in September, school officials said.

That could change, however, should the school not complete on time renovations necessary for bringing sections of the campus and buildings set to house classrooms and dorm rooms up to code.

And though the eventual opening will not bring the 200 students and 20 new buildings originally proposed, officials with both the Maharishi Academy and the town of Antrim say they are optimistic that progress is being made.

"That's how anyone has to start a new project. You start with a good strong desire, and then you deal with the practical realities of getting there," said Alan W. Colby, the academy's headmaster, newly arrived from his former role as principal of the Maharishi School of the Age of Enlightenment day school in Fairfield, Iowa.

"There's nothing wrong with that goal. We're going to get there," he said. "It's just a matter of how quickly. It's not a matter of scaling back or being unrealistic. Someone builds a home. They set a date for when it's going to be open and they'll move in. Very rarely do they move in on the date they set. It's just kind of the way things unfold."

School officials initially estimated that 200 students would be enrolled in classes during the first school year and that the academy would then grow toward a total student body of 400.

That number was pared down several months ago to between 50 and 75 male students. The proposed burst of construction of new dormitories, a dining hall and an exhibition hall was scaled down in favor of building in phases, beginning with two buildings containing classrooms and dormitories that were to be completed during the first school year.

The number of students expected for the first year has since been lowered again, by about half.

The private school, named after the late spiritual leader Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, would teach a technique called transcendental meditation. Proponents of the practice say it expands the mind's capabilities beyond the fraction of the brain that people currently use.

School officials hope the technique, when combined with a regular course of instruction, will allow the Maharishi Academy to join Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter and St. Paul's School in Concord among New Hampshire's elite college preparatory schools.

But before the school can begin accepting students, the campus needs to be ready for them, Colby said.

That means cleaning up rubble left behind when two buildings, a former library and a dormitory, were demolished.

The gymnasium, which will also have four classrooms, needs to be refurbished and renovated. And Scarborough Hall, which will be used primarily for dorm rooms and administrative offices, needs to be brought up to fire-safety codes.

Officials have set a fundraising target of about \$1.33 million, though the projects might be able to be completed for less than \$1 million, Colby said.

If the school is unable to raise that money soon enough to get the work done, then the start of classes will have to be postponed, he said.

"That doesn't mean we won't be starting," Colby said. "We'll be going full speed, and when we open, we'll be ready."

The Maharishi Academy will not accept students until then, he said.

"They have to make their plans. We don't want them planning to come here, and then have us turn around and say we're not ready," Colby said. "If they want to wait, they can, but if they want to pursue other schools, that may be in their best interests."

The school will then have fewer students at first, with hopes of growing in the future, he said.

"Any school will start small and then work its way up," Colby said. "I think we would like to start with a minimum of 30 or 40, but I think we could start with even less if that's the way it works out.

"Our determination is to start very strong and clear," he said. "It'll happen no matter what the timetable is."

Town officials say they can wait patiently while the school grows on what was once the campus for Hawthorne College, which opened as Nathaniel Hawthorne College in 1962 and closed 26 years later.

The Maharishi Vedic School, which teaches meditation techniques and alternative health courses, has owned the Old North Branch Road property for more than a decade. It was used as that school's national headquarters until recently, when the group went to a more regional structure, officials said.

A September 2006 proposal to build a medical college never got off the ground.

"Anything that can bring in growth is a good thing for the town of Antrim," said Michael D. Genest, chairman of the town's board of selectmen. "To see use of those buildings in that area would be good for the town, even with a minimal number of kids.

"You hate to see any place deteriorate," he said. "You want to see things more vibrant, and up and running. It's a beautiful piece of property, if they can make use of what it was originally for, which was a college."

And the change in plans didn't come as a surprise, said Antrim Town Administrator William A. Prokop.

"We thought they had a very aggressive plan," Prokop said. "When they first talked to us, they said it might be in phases. That's what it's coming down to. There's improvement already, which is what we're looking for.

"We'd rather see a nice, slow, steady growth of the school than 'boom,' all of a sudden it's up and not planned through," he said. "I think it's a matter of waiting and seeing. We're not overly optimistic, nor are we disappointed. We think it's on track with where it should be."

David P. Greisman can be reached at 352-1234, extension 1439, or dgreisman@keenesentinel.com