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Candidate Ford Proposes New School Site For Chicago Schools

By Patricia Hawke

The old Brach's plant is located at 401 N. Cicero, just north of Lake Street, in a community that has seen many of its Chicago schools closed and others placed on academic probation. The 30-plus-acre property has been vacant for three years.

LaShawn Ford is the owner of Ford Desired Real Estate and candidate for state representative of the 8th district. The democrat has an ambitious plan to use the Brach property for a new school.

In June of 2006, Ford convinced Chicago schools' officials to join him in a walkthrough of his plan at the site. Though he had prior permission for the walkthrough with the Chicago schools' officials, there was no one present to give them access through the 30-foot fence that surrounds the property. As with most politicians, Ford improvised by driving through a hole in the fencing to gain access.

Chicago schools' officials found that the property was close to Chicago's Green Line, and it had some great parking space. Ford emphasized that a school located there could cater to many students from many areas of the city — Chicago schools' buses could transport students in from different districts. The Chicago schools' officials saw that the location and amount of property could attract a multitude of students with diverse economical, cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Ford further pointed out that the Chicago schools had recently invested \$30 million into Austin High School for Renaissance 2010 upgrades. He noted that had they foregone those renovations, they could had invested in a new school at the Brach location that would provide much more to the Chicago schools' students over the long term.

The biggest problem facing Ford's ambitious plans for the Chicago schools is zoning. The old Brach plant sits in the city's Protected Manufacturing District. That means that sites within the district can be used only for industrial development. When presented with other plans in the past, the city has been reluctant to rezone the area for commercial or residential development.

The second problem is financing. The property currently is listed at the Paine/Wetzel INCOR International web site for \$10 million. The Chicago schools' officials have suggested that the best

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scenario would be for a donor to purchase the Brach property and give it to the Chicago schools for further development. Even this, of course, is contingent on whether or not the Chicago schools have enough surplus funds to build the school. The estimated cost of building is from \$20 to \$40 million. Of course, the perfect solution would be for donors to cover the cost of building, as well.

As it currently stands, Ford's proposal is being considered by the Chicago schools. The Chicago schools' officials stated that further study on the project would be needed before any decisions could be made.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in–depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. Patricia has a nose for research and writes stimulating news and views on school issues. For more information on Chicago schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk–12.com/illinois/chicago/index.html>

Chicago Schools Opens Its First Virtual Elementary School

By Patricia Hawke

The Illinois State Board of Education has approved the state's first virtual public elementary school, the Chicago Virtual Charter School. The Board acted against State Superintendent Randy Dunn's recommendation to disapprove the Chicago schools application, as well as against the opposition of the powerful Chicago Teachers Union, by voting a five–to–four approval.

Though virtual schools already exist in the United States, they usually are high schools. Several states, however, prohibit virtual charter schools, such as Indiana, Tennessee and New York. South Carolina goes one step further by prohibiting any home–based instruction at its charter schools.

Opposition to the Chicago schools' new virtual elementary school stem from a variety of areas. Here are just a few:

- Computers will replace teachers and/or reduce their role in education, eliminating many teacher positions.
- The one–on–one attention that students may receive in a physical classroom setting will be lost.
- Virtual students in the Chicago schools will not receive enough social interaction, stunting their socialization skills.

Proponents believe the Chicago schools new virtual institution may give some children a chance to succeed, where traditional schools already have failed. The state board's Chairman Jesse Ruiz noted that he received many compelling letters from parents, pleading for an alternative approach for their Chicago schools children.

Another issue that faced the state board is the current Illinois law on charter schools, which states they

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must be "non-home based". It was for this reason that State Superintendent Dunn had recommended the new Chicago schools' application be denied. This added more fuel to the Teachers Union's argument against approving the school.

State board members and proponents argued that the charter school laws were enacted in the 1990s, before lawmakers could have anticipated the growth of technology that makes a virtual school possible. Chicago schools General Counsel Patrick Rocks told the board that the restrictions on home-based charter schools were from concerns that home schools would attempt to reposition themselves as charter schools in order to secure public funding.

Charter schools are part of the Chicago schools system and are given more flexibility in staffing, curriculum and other areas — similar in theory to home schools. They receive public funding per student, causing the lawmakers concern over a possible redefinition of home schools. Rocks presented board members with letters from several of the lawmakers who enacted the law that stated their intent was not to block Internet-based schooling.

After the vote, Teachers Union President Marilyn Stewart vowed to take "swift and appropriate" action to stop or block the opening of the school. Rocks noted that it was very unlikely that the Union could

mount any viable legal challenge.

The Chicago schools' new virtual institution opens September 13, 2006. Already about 300 families have applied for their children to attend, and the school can accept another 300 students, according to Sharon Hayes, head of the school.

Once enrolled, the Chicago schools families receive desktop computers, workbooks and other student materials. The Chicago schools students are required to meet weekly at a downtown Chicago learning center, located within DePaul University. The students interact regularly with teachers through emails, conferences and workshops, as well as interacting with teachers and other students at the learning center.

Chicago Virtual Charter School already scheduled to serve a wide variety of elementary Chicago schools children. They include gifted and special education students, as well as children who previously attended public, private and home schools. Their web site is at:

<http://www.chicagovcs.org>

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